The New Criterion

December 1989

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1

The Wexner Center in Columbus *by Hilton Kramer,* 5

Redefining culture and democracy *by Samuel Lipman,* 10

John Berryman *by Bruce Bawer,* 19

"Pioneering Cubism" *by Karen Wilkin,* 29

The case against Martin Bernal *by David Gress,* 36

New poems *by Sandra McPherson, Brian Culhane & Paul Lake,* 44

Art: Diasporisms *by Jed Perl,* 51; **Music:** At Merkin Hall *by Dana Mack,* 55; **Television:** "Art of the Western world" on PBS *by Eric Gibson,* 61

Books: *Miranda Seymour* A ring of conspirators *reviewed by James W. Tuttleton,* 66; *Richard Howard* No traveller *reviewed by Robert Richman,* 72; *Kazuo Ishiguro* The remains of the day *reviewed by David Gurewich,* 77

Volume 8, Number 4

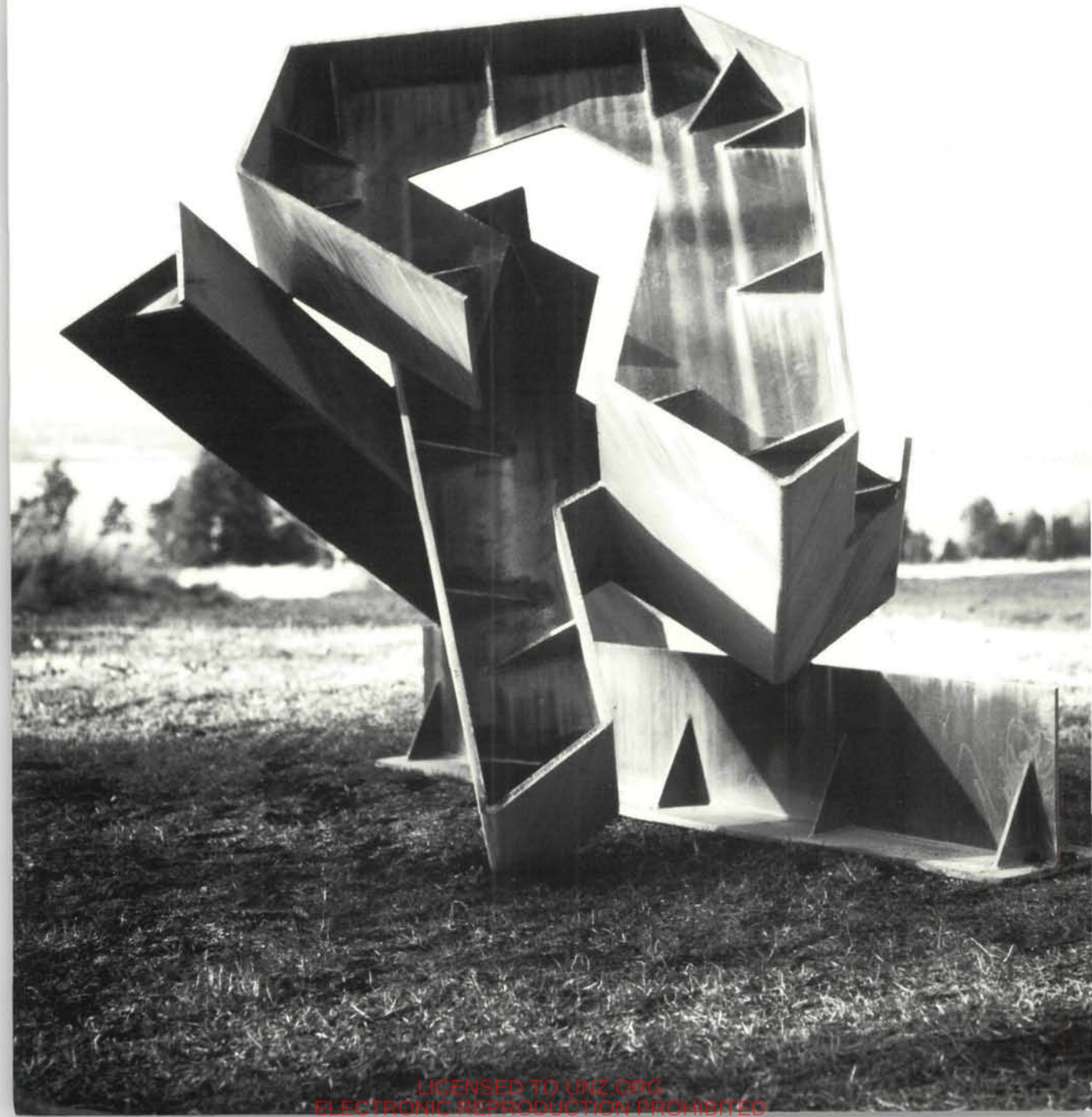
$4.00

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RUBINOFF

Jeffrey Rubinoff
Studio, Hornby Island,
B.C., Canada V0R 1Z0
(604) 335-0668

Texada #1 1983
Cor-ten plate
Height 7'



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

De Musica *Project for Dallas XI* Steel $11\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{8} \times 2\frac{15}{16}$ in. 1989

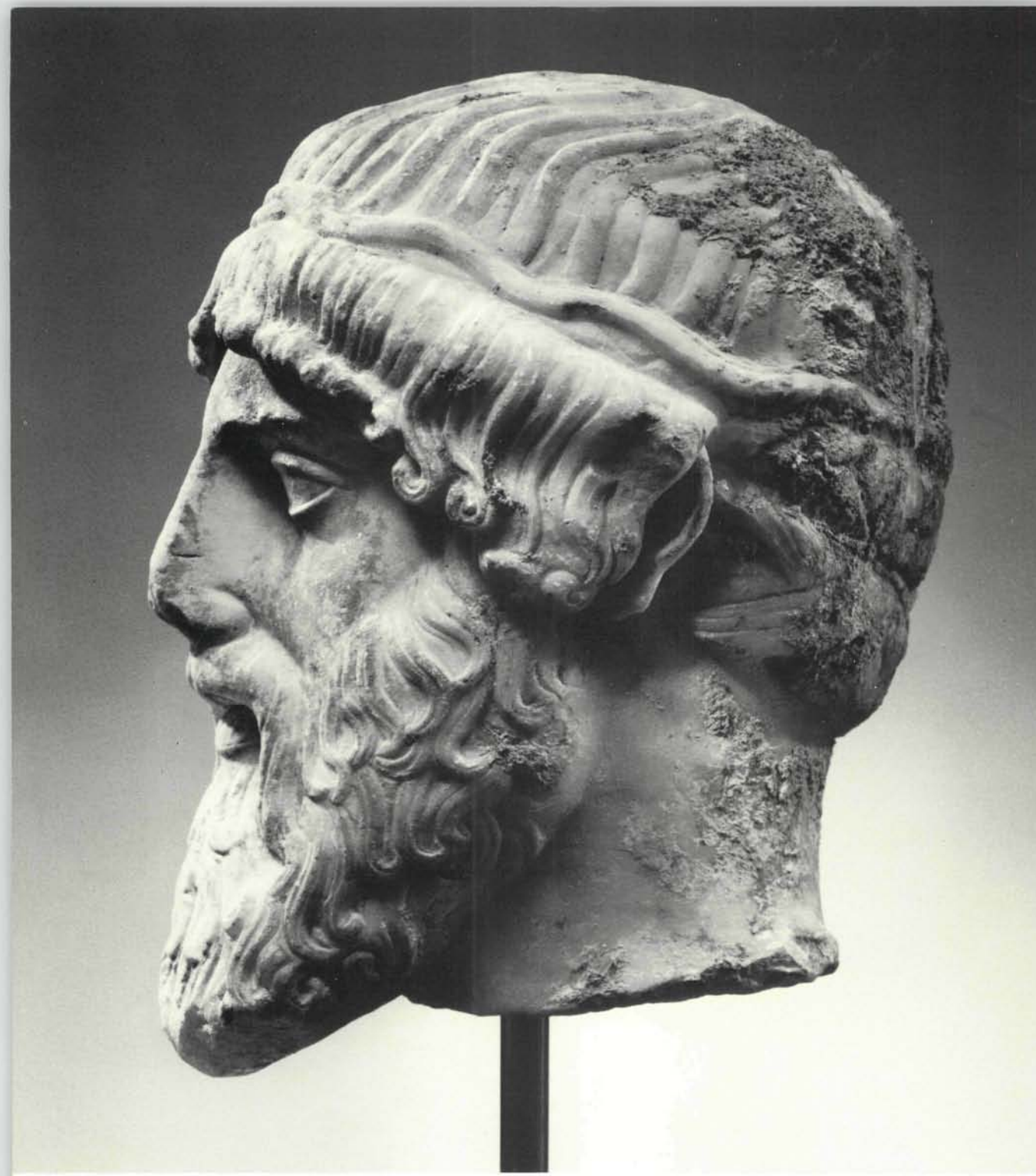
Chillida

November–December

Sidney Janis Gallery 110 w 57

in association with José Tasende

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Life-size marble head of Zeus. Roman, after the Greek, 1st century A.D.

André Emmerich Gallery

41 East 57th Street, New York 10022 Telephone (212) 752-0124 Fax 212 371 7345

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *December 1989*

Editor *Hilton Kramer*
Publisher *Samuel Lipman*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Managing Editor *Donna Rifkind*
Office Manager *Christopher Carduff*

Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer's most recent book, *Diminishing Fictions,* has been published by Graywolf Press.

Brian Culhane's poems have appeared in *Antaeus* and *Shenandoah.*

David Gress is Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution. He is co-author of a two-volume *History of West Germany,* published by Basil Blackwell.

David Gurewich reviewed Henri Troyat's *Gorky* for the November issue of *The New Criterion.*

Paul Lake is the author of *Another Kind of Travel* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Samuel Lipman's article in this issue is adapted from a paper given at a conference on the future of liberal democracies in London last August.

Sandra McPherson's most recent book is *Streamers* (Ecco).

Dana Mack wrote about the Vienna production of the opera *The Emperor of Atlantis* for our September issue.

Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* has been published by North Point Press.

Robert Richman is the editor of *The Direction of Poetry,* published by Houghton Mifflin.

James W. Tuttleton teaches American literature at New York University.

Karen Wilkin wrote on Helen Frankenthaler and her critics for our October issue.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. December 1989, Volume 8, Number 4. Subscriptions: $32 for one year, $60 for two. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019.

Copyright © 1989 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc.

U.S.A. newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, OH 44870. English distribution by Periodicals in Particular, London NW1. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of issue date.

Advertising representative: Kate Shanley, 799 Broadway, Room 237, New York, NY 10003. (212) 477-4905.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman and printed by the Eastern Press of New Haven, Connecticut.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TATISTCHEFF

NEW YORK

10TH ANNIVERSARY
EXHIBITION 79-89

GALLERY ARTISTS

DECEMBER 5-30

50 WEST 57TH STREET

NEW YORK NY 10019

212 664 0907

LOS ANGELES

PLEIN-AIR
LANDSCAPE NOW

DECEMBER 16 - JANUARY 13

1547 10TH STREET

SANTA MONICA CA 90401

213 395 8807

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: December 1989

Virgil Thomson (1896-1989)

With the death in October of Virgil Thomson at the age of ninety-two, the necrology of the first generation of American modernist composers is almost complete. Of this first generation, active in the 1920s, only Aaron Copland, born in 1900, remains as a living reminder that once upon a time an exciting future for a serious American music seemed to be waiting only for its discovery.

As a composer Virgil Thomson will be remembered for at least two of his operas, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947). Both works are settings of texts by Gertrude Stein, and both are full of her quirky, canny, and witty presence; the earlier opera arose out of Thomson's friendship with Stein during his early expatriate years in Paris after World War I, and the later work served as his memorial to her. *Four Saints* was immediately, and correctly, perceived as an icon of Franco-American modernism. By contrast, *The Mother of Us All* represented a kind of assimilation of Stein to the homespun middle-American world of Susan B. Anthony, temperance, and suffragism.

It was Thomson's achievement as a composer to draw his musical style equally from the Protestant hymn tunes of his childhood and from the refined simplicities of post-Romantic French music, especially that of the sophisticatedly childish Erik Satie; it was Thomson's genius to make out of this unlikely combination an unforgettable amalgam, instantly recognizable as his own. He wrote one opera of interest in the 1960s: *Lord Byron* was a treatment—by turns quaintly old-fashioned and touchingly serious—of the poet's adventures on his short road from genius to death. The two Stein operas had been well and even rapturously received by a sophisticated public, but *Lord Byron* has suffered the fate endemic to serious American operas: inadequate productions, carping press, and oblivion.

Thomson was also a formidable writer of English, or, more accurately, American prose. Blessed with a straightforward, sprightly, and piquant style, during his years on the New York *Herald Tribune* from 1940 to 1954 he earned an enduring reputation as the best music critic, along with James Gibbons Huneker, America has yet produced. He was energetic, interesting, accurate, and opinionated. He was a great backer of American composers and performers, and he influenced the introduction into the American concert repertory of a large amount of French music, along with a lessening of our total concentration on the Germanic masterpieces. A great deal of his criticism was collected in book form, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

much of it remains available to this day. He published his sassy but essential memoirs in 1966, and a collection of his letters appeared just last year.

By all accounts Virgil Thomson was a happy man, and his talent and his success supported that happiness well. Though the fact of his death was sad, that of his life was not, and under ordinary circumstances we might thus be able to take comfort that in Thomson's case at least, talent, intelligence, and tenacity were rewarded. But today in American music we do not live under ordinary circumstances. It can be simply put: Thomson's life may well have been a happy one, and in that we rejoice; but we cannot rejoice in the present state of American music.

The sad fact is that classical music composition in America today is an orphan, living in the history books in a way it does not live in concert halls and opera houses. We have our golden age of symphonic composition from the 1920s through the 1940s, the age of Copland, Howard Hanson, Walter Piston, Roy Harris, Samuel Barber, and the still active William Schuman and David Diamond, as well as a few others; in opera we have Thomson's two Stein works, and perhaps *Lord Byron*. But the quickest glance at concert programs across the country shows that, save for conductors Gerard Schwarz and Leonard Slatkin, this great achievement has few present-day champions. In the field of opera, it is notorious that none of Thomson's works has yet received the vastly deserved honor of a performance in a great opera house. It is good news that *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1953-56), a remarkable setting of the Pirandello play by Hugo Weisgall (b. 1912) and a major milestone in the history of American opera, will be performed (in a small house) next June by the Chicago Lyric Opera—but this will only be *Six Characters*'s second production, and it will take place more than thirty years after the first.

We honor Virgil Thomson's life, as well we should; but distinguished composers are, after all, not about lives but about music. It is no honor to them, and no service to the present, that we continue, as we have for so many years now, to ignore their music.

"Bingo!" in Hartford, or, how to exploit a controversy

The ongoing saga of the Mapplethorpe exhibition that has already caused a fire storm in Congress and set in motion an official inquiry into the workings of the National Endowment for the Arts, which helped to finance the show, continues to illuminate a good deal more about the current art scene than the organizers of the event could ever have intended to bring to our attention. Among much else, it has something to tell us about the decline in taste and intelligence that is now an accepted feature in museums that once took pride in setting high aesthetic standards for the communities they serve.

The particular art museum we have in mind, in this case, is the venerable Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, which is said to be the oldest institution of its kind in America. It is, or at least it once was, a jewel of a museum. It boasts of splendid collections in the fine arts and the decorative arts, and under several of its former directors—most notably A. Everett Austin, Jr., in the Thirties, and Charles C. Cunningham and James Elliott in more recent decades—it came to occupy an important place in the art life of the nation.

But since 1976, when Mr. Elliott left to become the director of the University Art Museum at the University of California in Berkeley, the Atheneum has clearly fallen on parlous times. It had virtually become a dropout as far as the national art scene was concerned, and today it appears to be mired in the worst muddle of its history.

Nearly two years ago the Atheneum acquired a new director, Patrick McCaughey, who arrived from Australia with no higher

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

goal, apparently, than to win for the museum the kind of sensational publicity it had always shunned in the past. Even this dubious goal proved to be elusive, however, until the Mapplethorpe exhibition landed on the Atheneum's doorstep. This was exactly the publicity opportunity Mr. McCaughey had been looking for, and he was clearly determined to make the most of it. "Bingo!" he exclaimed in an interview in *The New York Times* on the eve of the show's opening in Hartford. "This will put us absolutely in the national spotlight."

Well, it hasn't done any such thing. The Mapplethorpe show has inevitably caused a stir in Hartford, as any event at the very center of such a controversy would. But beyond that, neither the show itself nor Mr. McCaughey's "Bingo!" interview, which appeared only in the Connecticut section of the *Times*, has done much to enhance the museum's reputation. What it has done, however, is raise questions about Mr. McCaughey's judgment in artistic matters, and thus about his competence as the director of a serious art museum.

The key passage in the *Times* interview was the following:

> Of Mr. Mapplethorpe, Mr. McCaughey said: "He's an important artist for his ennoblement of the human figure. At first he was seen as a wayward artist from the fringe homosexual community, but he moved toward reviving classical images. His male nudes bear comparison with those of Michaelangelo, Rodin or Picasso."

The *Times*'s interviewer was too discreet, perhaps, to press Mr. McCaughey for a clarification of this matter of "ennoblement," for the pictures under dispute in the Mapplethorpe exhibition are, as all the world now knows, devoted to images of sadomasochistic sexual acts—in other words, sexual torture. Nor was Mr. McCaughey asked to enlarge upon his preposterous references to Michaelangelo, Rodin, and Picasso. Mr. McCaughey was simply allowed to press on with yet another outlandish comparison.

> When asked if this is an appraisal from hindsight [the *Times* story continued], Mr. McCaughey said that it was easier to assess a closed career but that the photographer was an artist of the [same] sort as Van Gogh, one who starts outside and moves inside.

So now, at least in the vicinity of Hartford, Connecticut, Robert Mapplethorpe has been elevated to the ranks of Michelangelo, Rodin, Picasso, and Van Gogh. Does anyone really believe this? Does Mr. McCaughey really believe this? We frankly doubt it. But this is what happens when a passion for the limelight overtakes every other consideration in the affairs of an art museum. Mr. McCaughey's facile comparisons are also, of course, the mark of a provincial mind, which is not at all what the Atheneum is most in need of at the present time. Hartford's real distinction in the Mapplethorpe affair has been to add an intellectual scandal to all the other misfortunes that have followed in the wake of this ill-conceived exhibition.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

CY TWOMBLY
BOLSENA PAINTINGS
DECEMBER 12-JANUARY 20 1990

980 MADISON AVE NEW YORK 744-2313

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Wexner Center in Columbus

by Hilton Kramer

Of the many things to be said about the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, which opened on the campus of Ohio State University on November 17, the first concerns its emblematic status. For the Wexner Center, designed by Peter Eisenman and built at a cost of forty-three million dollars, is no ordinary campus facility intended to bring a little leisure-time culture to the academy and its community. The Center's ambitions are a good deal larger than that. So are its pretensions, and foremost among them is that this mega-center for the arts somehow "challenges" what its director, Robert Stearns, calls "conventional thinking."

In uttering this now hoary cliché on such an august occasion, Mr. Stearns would seem, at first glance, to be blissfully ignorant of the degree to which all such talk about challenges to conventional thinking has become the very mark of conventional wisdom in the arts. Mr. Eisenman would seem to be similarly oblivious—both in the building he has designed for the Wexner Center and in the elaborate intellectual apologia he has adumbrated in its defense. But as neither of these extremely well-informed professionals is likely to be the least bit ignorant about such matters—Mr. Eisenman has shown himself to be particularly shrewd at calculating his exact relation to the taste of his time, and Mr. Stearns comes to Columbus from, among other venues, the Kitchen Center in SoHo and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis—we are therefore obliged to decode (or should one say deconstruct?) their statements about the Wexner Center in order to understand what its true function is likely to be.

The key to this task turns out to be a rather elementary one. We have simply to comprehend that every statement offered in defense of the Wexner Center means the very opposite of what it appears to be saying. Once we have grasped this basic Orwellian premise, everything about the Wexner Center is a good deal clearer than it would otherwise be.

What the Wexner Center actually represents, then, is the very opposite of the now familiar and timeworn claim about challenges to conventional thinking. What makes the Wexner Center interesting, in fact, is also what makes it so depressing: that it so ostentatiously encapsulates, both in its architecture and its artistic program, a very different development in our cultural life—namely, the academicization of the arts in our time. What has indeed been erected at such huge cost on the campus of this immense university is a kind of overscale memorial chapel where the avant-garde pieties of yesteryear—the sort of thing already under study in undergraduate courses and graduate seminars, and long triumphant in the museums, the art market, and the media—are to be turned into objects of orthodox worship and emulation, and where any ideas that might be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought to question the primacy of this established academicism are systematically excluded as heretical or—what nowadays amounts to the same thing—unchic.

We are given our first vivid sense of the kind of pieties to be encountered in the Wexner Center even before we have entered the building itself. Along one entire side of Mr. Eisenman's costly structure we find a five-story, open-air, geometrical scaffold, painted a pristine white, that looks like nothing so much as the largest Sol LeWitt sculpture ever made. True, it isn't an exact replica of a LeWitt sculpture. It is more like an overgrown variation on one of Mr. LeWitt's favorite themes, and gives the viewer a magnified impression of something already seen many times before.

Into this overscale appropriation (as I suppose it must be called) of the Minimalist conventions that have been a staple of "advanced" art since the Sixties, Mr. Eisenman has, to be sure, introduced a faint suggestion of the irrational by manipulating the shifting perspectives that are inherent in a protracted geometrical scaffold on this scale. This very modest variation doesn't amount to much as an artistic idea, and would scarcely be worth mentioning but for one thing: it is so clearly a sign of what Mr. Eisenman thinks of as a highly individual "creative" touch. You take an established convention and give it just enough of a twist to make the whole idea seem—well, sort of fresh and original and provocative.

The twist itself doesn't actually dislodge anything fundamental to the convention, but it can nonetheless be thought to confer upon the convention a vague air of mystery or—as the current architectural jargon has it—interrogation. As art, however, it does not so much "interrogate" as act as a parasite on the convention that is essential to its existence. It is in such acts of aesthetic parasitism that the basic spirit of Mr. Eisenman's deconstructivist architecture is to be found. It merely feeds on and depletes the host organism, which in this case is a whole body of modernist art and architecture. Which is why I tend to think of this brand of deconstructivist design as tapeworm architecture.

There is another sense, too, in which Mr. Eisenman's oversize LeWittian scaffold is a parasitic twist on an established convention. We are all familiar to the point of surfeit with the kind of dumb public sculpture that nowadays is likely to adorn the plaza of a prestigious new building. These pesky public sculptures are customarily placed in front of a building's main entrance: we encounter them first when we enter the building and then again when we leave. Now the Wexner Center has, in Mr. Eisenman's proud words, "no recognizable entry in the classical sense." It has neither front nor back, but is, in more than one sense, all side. It has no plaza, either, for Mr. Eisenman deliberately selected a site that required him to wedge the Wexner Center into an awkward space between two existing buildings. Still, this was no reason—in Mr. Eisenman's view—to forgo the usual sculptural adornment, so he has simply shifted it to the building's side. And as Mr. Eisenman obviously prefers his own handiwork to that of any of the sculptors who might have been commissioned to provide such a work, he has created for the Wexner Center this enormous simulacrum of a work of public art as part of the total architectural package.

One has to acknowledge that, as a concept, this absorption of public sculpture into the total architectural package has a certain brute audacity. But as either sculpture or architecture, the result is rather pathetic, and it has encumbered the Ohio State campus with an elephantine structure that already looks dated and silly. My prediction is that this giant scaffold will age very badly, and over time will become an abiding object of derision for those who are obliged, day after day and year after year, to pass under its sprawling, unsheltering presence.

Yet this huge, unlovely scaffold does, I suppose, have one small virtue: it serves as an appropriate introduction to much of what we find inside the Wexner Center once we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have gained entrance to its maze-like interior. Inside, however, although there are further traces of LeWittian Minimalism in evidence, the emphasis shifts to variations on another familiar mode of Minimalist sculpture—that of Donald Judd. Throughout the needlessly eccentric interior spaces of the Wexner Center it has pleased Mr. Eisenman to give us a succession of facsimile Judds of his own creation. Sometimes tilted—an allusion to Richard Serra, perhaps, or is it to Ronald Bladen and Tony Smith?—and sometimes perpendicular to the floor, these Minimalist embellishments serve only to tease the spectator into guessing which of them are actually supporting beams and which are Mr. Eisenman's private jokes. Obviously Mr. Eisenman is vastly amused by architectural entertainments of this sort, but his pleasure is unlikely to be shared by those who look to architecture for something more than an academic joke. What *is* funny is that a mind as worldly as Mr. Eisenman's should not have recognized how short-lived our interest in this sort of thing is likely to be. Professors who go on telling the same jokes year after year are the stuff of academic legend, of course, but I shouldn't have thought that was the kind of legend Mr. Eisenman aspired to become.

It must not be supposed, however, that Mr. Eisenman's immersion in Minimalist sculpture and other fashionable varieties of contemporary art has disposed him to be especially sensitive to the needs of that art in designing spaces for its exhibition at the Wexner Center. On the contrary, in the four principal exhibition sites—they can scarcely be called galleries—which Mr. Eisenman has provided for the Wexner Center, the spaces are so eccentric and incommodious, so inhospitable to the showing of discrete art objects and thus so hostile to the kind of aesthetic experience we look to such objects to give us, that there can be no question as to whose vision is meant to remain dominant regardless of what is eventually installed in these areas. Even in this respect Mr. Eisenman is no pioneer, of course. He is merely following—and competing with—the practice of his colleagues in the architectural profession who have come to look upon museum design as, above all, a medium of artistic self-aggrandizement. Few, to be sure, have been given such an open-ended, unimpeded warrant to turn exhibition spaces, which in principle are meant to serve the aesthetic interest of other artists, into such a blatant form of self-advertising. But in this matter, as in so many others, Mr. Eisenman's design represents only another, more extreme twist on what is now, unhappily, an established architectural convention.

The unshapely exhibition sites that Mr. Eisenman has designed for the Wexner Center will, in any event, pose maddening installation problems for the curators, who, it may confidently be predicted, will soon learn to despise every square inch of the space they have been saddled with. It will take a little time, however, for these feelings to reach fever pitch. For the moment, no art object—none, that is, other than Mr. Eisenman's own manipulations of the space—has been allowed to violate the exhibition sites he has designed for the Wexner Center. Not until February 16, three months after the opening, will we get to see how these sites function for the art that will be exhibited in them. Until then, we are invited to contemplate nothing but the vacant purity of Mr. Eisenman's wayward conception.

Before looking at the exhibition program that is planned for these unwelcoming spaces, let us turn for a moment to Mr. Eisenman's apologia for his design of the Wexner Center. Not surprisingly, his statements on the subject are about as credible as Mr. Stearns's talk about challenges to conventional thinking. "Part of the [architectural] program" for the Wexner Center, Mr. Eisenman tells us, "was to make a building about the art of the 21st century. But we cannot know what the art of the 21st century will be, so we responded by making a building that is waiting to be a building."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Thus, the Wexner Center is said to be "about a building forever coming into being." It is Mr. Eisenman's further claim that in the Wexner Center "you cannot ever be entirely sure where you are." "This idea of creating uncertainty in space where formerly there was always certainty," he avers, "was one of the central ideas in the work."

Much of this is the sheerest nonsense, of course. The problem with the space in the Wexner Center is not that it creates "uncertainty" but that it prompts irritation, fosters discomfort, and is otherwise unresponsive to the functions it is meant to serve. It is so completely designed for short-lived effects and the results are so poorly thought out—I've never seen a building of comparable pretension that had so many leftover, throwaway spaces that are utterly useless—that the visitor finds himself mentally correcting the architect's mistakes at every turn of its labyrinthine design. Moreover, it is not true that "you cannot ever be entirely sure where you are" in this building. Far from it. Whether in the oddly shaped offices, which have windows below eye level—just great for curators who work on their hands and knees—or in the exhibition areas or even in the passageways (there are stairways in which you have to walk single file), you always know where you are because the spaces are so willfully eccentric you couldn't mistake them for any other.

As for the exhibition sites, Mr. Eisenman has put both artists and the public on notice as to what he expects of them. "I think the galleries could be a challenge to artists," he says, "an opportunity for them to confront the architecture." And if artists have an aesthetic agenda of their own, which tends to be the case with serious artists, too bad. According to Mr. Eisenman, "in the main gallery spaces . . . the idea is to challenge living artists with an active [which means, of course, an obstructive] space." The artists will either dance to his tune here or they won't dance at all. In regard to the public, Mr. Eisenman is similarly concerned to have everything his way—"the main gallery," he says, "attempts to give people a sense of being between a place and a non-place, between location and dislocation." Which is just what we go to a gallery to see, of course.

The real comedy of all this pretentious blather is made clear when we see what it is that Mr. Stearns has in mind to offer the Wexner Center's public. Here I must quote from the voluminous press material. "The first revolutionary work to receive attention," we are solemnly informed, "will be the Wexner Center building itself . . . . when the Center opens its doors, the vanguard California-based group Antenna Theater will offer tours of the building through an inventive audio production. People coming to the Wexner Center will be provided with"—what else?—"Sony Walkmans; the recorded program will direct them on an adventure through the building, thus involving them directly in a participatory theatrical event." Well, we know that "vanguard" groups aren't what they used to be, but who would have guessed that they have now been reduced to providing guided tours of new campus facilities?

As to what we can look forward to while this "revolutionary" building "is waiting to be a building," the main exhibition program that Mr. Stearns has organized for our benefit consists of little more than a roundup of the usual suspects. We are first to have an exhibition of the art of the 1950s and 1960s: Willem de Kooning, Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, et al. This will be followed by a survey of the 1960s and 1970s: Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Joseph Beuys, Gilbert and George—the usual thing, in other words. Then will come a show of the 1970s and 1980s, and for that, it will come as no surprise to learn, Mr. Stearns promises that "we [shall] invite artists to respond to the building. Artists who have been active [meaning, of course, fashionable and overrated] in the past twenty years will be commissioned to create pieces in response to the building." In short, exactly what has been going on without intermission in our museums since the 1960s. Process art, performance art, aleatory music, Minimal-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ism, Pop Art and rock music, video and film—all of this, I suppose, is what Mr. Stearns has in mind when he says that artists will be invited "to use the [Wexner Center] building as a laboratory." But we may wonder if "laboratory" is the right word to describe what is so clearly to be a succession of re-enactments of the experiments of the past. Properly decoded, what this bold claim actually amounts to is a journey down memory lane for aging avant-gardists.

Among the many aging avant-gardists who will be doing their very old thing at the Wexner Center, the name most fervently invoked during my recent visit to Columbus was—again no surprise—that of John Cage. Since the Wexner Center is no doubt equipped with more up-to-date technology for producing atrocious sound than other facilities of this sort, it was inevitable that Mr. Cage would sooner or later get star billing on its program, and we can be confident that he will tax the sensoriums of the Columbus public to the utmost. I am very glad that I won't have to be there to hear the result. It was no less a figure than the late Virgil Thomson who pronounced the definitive judgment on Mr. Cage some years ago when, in his book on *American Music Since 1910*, he described Cage's work as "emotionally shallow." Mr. Thomson then went on to make a point that applies as much to the Wexner Center as a whole as it does to Mr. Cage in particular: "He prizes innovation above all other qualities—a weighting of the values which gives to all of his judgments an authoritarian, almost a commercial aspect, as of a one-way tunnel leading only to the gadget-fair." In the Wexner Center, Mr. Cage will indeed find the total gadget-fair he has been in search of for a lifetime.

There is, finally, something to be said about the patron who has made the Wexner Center possible. Leslie H. Wexner, the alumnus of Ohio State who contributed twenty-five million dollars to the Center, is the founder, president, and chairman of the board of The Limited, Inc., the vast enterprise that includes, among much else, the Gap and Banana Republic clothing-store chains. Mr. Wexner is clearly something of a genius in his own field of endeavor; he may indeed be the only genius to be connected with the Wexner Center. And the nature of his accomplishment in the retail clothing business does a great deal, I think, to illuminate the real character of the Wexner Center itself. For just as Mr. Wexner, in his business enterprise, adapted the dress codes of the Sixties counterculture to the shifting sartorial conventions of middle-class America, so does the Wexner Center institutionalize the impulses and ideas of Sixties art into an academic convention for what might very well be called Gap America. The cultural symmetry that joins the taste of The Limited to that of the Wexner Center is just about perfect. It is in this symmetry, rather than in all the talk about challenges to conventional thinking, creating uncertainty, etc., that the real meaning of the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts is to be found.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Redefining culture and democracy

by Samuel Lipman

Culture and *democracy*: these two words are central, separately and in association, both to the discussion of art in our society and to the larger debate about the meaning and the organization of life that has so occupied intellectuals in our time. The current definitions of these crucial terms have proven to be unstable and subject to the changing pressures of politics and the moral upheavals of the present day. As a result, the words culture and democracy themselves are now in danger of becoming unusable if they cannot be rigorously redefined in a way that makes them relevant both to the life of art and to the vitality of our democratic institutions.

It is this making of distinctions in an area so given to their blurring that I shall attempt here, in full consciousness of the hazards involved in redefining terms that so many have used and through which so many vested interests have been created. Culture, in the form of music, has been the work of my life; democracy is the political system under which we live, as well as the political system under which we, in view of the alternatives, would certainly choose to live. For many of us, our lives are in some way dedicated to culture; for us all, our lives are perforce dedicated to democracy. Ours is not the first historical period to notice the standing tension between the existence of culture and the extension of democracy, but ours may well be the first period in which free men feel it necessary to choose between them.

"Culture" and "democracy" are, of course, ideals. As ideals they sum up and embrace a multitude of our thoughts, our hopes, and, not least, our confusions. As ideals they also raise questions of ultimate meaning; unfortunately our own time is, as perhaps never before, uncomfortable with "ultimate" questions. Indeed, what is perhaps most distinctive about our spiritual life is our inability to deal with these most fundamental questions, even though we have hardly lost the need to ask them. In this regard, we are all children of the age: for us, merely to entertain the possibility of such questions is to hear the chill voice of skepticism and doubt.

Any attempt at redefining words like "culture" and "democracy" can hardly escape the charge of quixotry, if not of something worse. We all know that the idiosyncratic use of words is the most foolish of lost causes: it lends itself first to miscommunication and finally, if kept up long enough, to the charge of madness. Yet the attempt must be made. Definitions are fundamental to normative social thought; in the very act of defining our terms we go a long way toward defining goals. So central are the issues involved in this case that when we talk about culture and democracy we are doing more than talking about mind and the polity. We are proclaiming, both by commission and by omission, how we want to live—or, more precisely, how we want our children to live; we are, in other words, offering a vision of the future.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The best way, then, to begin to offer this vision is, I believe, to remind ourselves how these two words, culture and democracy, have been related to each other since the Enlightenment. In the eighteenth century, the chief threat to culture—if by culture is meant the life of the mind—seemed to come from the once monolithic structures of church and state. Even before the French Revolution, and for long after, the enemies of culture were seen to be the holders of established power. These included the inheritors of ascribed status, landed wealth, and spiritual office. Culture, accordingly, was thought to be achieved not through cooperation with the status quo, but in resistance to it—resistance in the name of democracy. In music, for example, this was the significance of the careers of Beethoven and Wagner, two eminent heroes of nineteenth-century culture: Beethoven's visions of human brotherhood in the Ninth Symphony and of freedom in *Fidelio*, like Wagner's combination of revolutionary politics and revolutionary music, symbolized the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment linkage of culture and democracy.

The twentieth century has taught the world things about political evil that the nineteenth century was incapable even of imagining. Nevertheless, in the present time this received idea about the union of culture and democracy has remained an unquestioned truth. When the autocracies of Prussianized Germany and Tsarist Russia gave way to the bloody tyrannies of Hitler's Nazism and Lenin's and Stalin's Bolshevism, the correlation between cultural barbarism and political dictatorship was made perfect. Two world wars served to vindicate the claims of culture against tyranny; merely to mention all those groups in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s devoted to the defense of culture is to recall that the struggle against Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and Mao was carried on in a significant and effective way in the name of culture.

The lesson that was drawn from this struggle for culture was plain. If autocracy and tyranny were the enemies of the life of the mind, the only possible friend of culture was (and is) democracy, now understood in wider and wider terms as the bearer of equally distributed political, social, and economic power. For intellectuals everywhere, the freedom necessary for the future of culture would then, and can now, only be assured through the universal victory of democracy in its most expanded definition.

Once democracy and its accompanying political, social, and economic freedoms had become the essential preconditions guaranteeing the health of culture, it was only a short step to seeing democracy itself as congruent with cultural vitality and integrity. As democracy was increasingly identified with the health of culture, it became increasingly convenient to equate democracy with culture; precisely because democracy was taken to mean unfettered cultural expression, culture came to be understood not in terms of its specific content, but as an expression of unfettered democratic freedom. It is this merging of culture and democracy that so confounds us today, and that, as we now see, is spreading to societies other than our own.

Thus, in our attempt to understand the fate of culture under our democratic system, more is involved than an effort to comprehend our own condition; for we are living in a world increasingly concerned to imitate, at least superficially, both the Western political model and the role it accords to culture. It is not clear whether the end of the twentieth century is witnessing the kind of global triumph of liberal democracy that Francis Fukuyama has envisioned in a much-debated article in *The National Interest*, the American foreign-policy journal.[1] Nor is it clear whether the recent fitful and tentative dismantlings of tyranny in the USSR and Communist China represent anything more than the beginnings of new autocracies; recent Chinese events are hardly reassuring. But whether or not the prospects for democracy in these

1 Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History?" appeared in *The National Interest*'s Summer 1989 issue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hitherto unfortunate societies are bright, it cannot be doubted that much is going on in them that is conceived in the Western image; much that happens will be judged, to some extent at least, by the criteria and the rhetoric the West has developed in the name of democracy.

What, then, are the salient characteristics of this democratic model in our society? Ours is a form of government that seems to provide the largest measure of political stability. It is a form of government that has made possible (or has at least presided over) a hitherto unimagined prosperity in material life, unparalleled social mobility, and sweeping intellectual change. Another side to these usually admired developments cannot be ignored: this other side of liberal democracy is the hitherto unimagined, and unimaginably rapid, destruction of traditional ways of life, disciplined social structures, cherished habits of faith, and inherited moral values.

There is no need to dwell either on Western material prosperity or on the social price being paid for this prosperity. Whether the shift of population from country to city, the reformulation of sexual roles, supersonic travel, the benefits of consumer electronics, and the new information technologies—whether these and other related developments counterbalance, for example, the destruction of the family and the gutting of organized religious belief, cannot now be known; it does seem likely that the West's new prosperity and new freedoms are inextricably linked to the anomie, to the emptiness and the nihilism so many witness in daily life, and feel inside themselves.

The discussion of liberal democracy and its future thus ineluctably leads us back to the question of culture. What is the state of culture in the lands known as the liberal democracies? One is tempted to answer that, in one sense at least, culture is thriving. Indeed, never before in human history have so many people created so much culture, and been so richly rewarded for doing so. As we go down our mean Walkmanned streets, as we shop in tawdry malls and order from mawkish catalogues, as we watch trivial television programs and go to coarse movies, as bloated new careers continue to be made in mass entertainment, the fact is inescapable: we are veritably drowning in culture.

The question, of course, is what precisely is now meant by this word "culture." To begin to answer this question is to confront the conundrums of definition, for the immediate and obvious reply to this question is simple: culture now includes everything, because as a term it now means little more than how people behave. If culture means behavior, there is indeed a lot of behaving—and misbehaving—going on.

To take comfort in this catchall definition of culture as behavior is surely to delude ourselves, for such acquiescence only invites a further question: if culture is to be defined merely as behavior, what place is there for the life of the mind? And here, as we start to address the present state of the life of the mind in our democracies, we find ourselves not only despondent in the present but pessimistic about the future. For those of us who have dedicated our lives to culture construed as the life of the mind, it is hardly too much to say that the word culture now hardly belongs to us at all.

Our loss is documented in the shifting definitions over time of the word "culture" itself. Of course, this word is notoriously difficult to define; not only has it been subject to a continuous process of redefinition by its friends, but it has proven all too easy for its enemies to define away. It is obvious to all that in its general usage the word "culture" has undergone a major shift in meaning and use over the last century and more.

A century ago, "culture" meant an ideal of intellectual and spiritual aspiration—the "study of perfection," as Matthew Arnold put it in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). The Germans meant something very similar when they talked early in the nineteenth century of *Kultur*. In our own time, "culture" has come to mean no more than a description of observed behavior, as in Ruth Benedict's influential *Patterns of Culture*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(1934). This shift is nothing less than a constitutive movement of thought and belief away from culture conceived of as the pursuit of what the Germans called *Bildung*, to culture conceived of in purely anthropological terms; as a shift, in other words, away from the formation of mind and character to the description of how individuals and peoples actually live. Put another way, this anthropologizing of culture quickly became in practice a mere rationalization of an often repellent social reality, rather than a constantly developing realization of the best and most hopeful features of that reality.

The loss of the older meaning of "culture" has been keenly felt. An attempt has been made by those who remain attached to the concept of culture as an ideal to re-appropriate it via the use of a qualifying adjective. And so "high" has gotten itself attached to "culture," and the combination—high culture, as we say—is in wide use. Though it has seemed natural to employ the phrase "high culture," and though its use now can hardly be avoided, one cannot overlook the fact that the result of this semantic jiggery-pokery has been unsatisfactory. The understandable and even excusable addition of "high" has hardly managed to save "culture" in its former sense; the very need to distinguish high culture has done little more than make it one culture among many "taste cultures," to use sociologist Herbert Gans's rather untasty phrase. If in modern usage "culture" is taken to describe the behavior of primitive peoples and of the industrialized masses, "high culture" is increasingly used to describe the tastes of a putatively social elite. The life of the mind has thus come to be seen as little more than a battle between what might be called nobs and mobs, or as what might better be called, now that Marxist economics has been so badly discredited, an updated version of the class struggle.

Not only is "culture" now split into high and low, elite and popular, refined and vulgar; the simpler expressions "a culture" and "cultures" are now only used to sum up and organize anthropo-sociological descriptions of behavior. Of the former conception of culture as an aspiration to accomplishment, and as the achievement of that aspiration, there now remains precious little. Of respect for culture existing outside the marketplace, for culture existing beyond the techniques of marketing, there is little more than a memory existing in the minds of the old. In its place we have what can only be called an entertainment industry, the matching of vulgar offerings with popular tastes through the agency of publicity and manufactured glamour. It can be simply put: increasingly, what counts is commercial success, nothing less and nothing more.

How much of this present situation of culture—construed, it must be stressed, as the life of the mind—is the inevitable and irreversible result of democracy? An answer to this question must begin, as in the case of culture, with a definition of the word. "Democracy," even more than culture, is a word whose definition changes with its proponents; it would be idle to expect a word that grew strong in revolution, and has for so many years formed the centerpiece of revolutionary rhetoric, to have suffered a different fate.

How, then, is "democracy" to be defined? There is, of course, a simple definition of democracy: the organization of political consent through frequent and free elections, in which representatives are chosen for fixed terms to perform defined executive and legislative tasks. On this definition, democracy is no more than a convenience—a blessed and necessary convenience, to be sure—that makes possible the orderly and predictable conduct of official business and the peaceful transfer of political power from and to individuals and groups.

But it is not this simple definition of democracy that is most compelling in liberal democracies today. Democracy is now taken to suggest a metaphysical structure, a means of explaining the human personality and even more of forming it. Anything anyone wants, and everything everyone wants, is found to have its place in democratic theory and practice. Indeed, today democracy has

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only friends—but with such friends, who needs enemies?

As a result, "democracy," like "culture," hardly seems to exist any longer as a word without another word qualifying it. The necessity of this addition of various adjectives only marks the change that has overtaken the idea of democracy from its origins as a mechanism for arranging the social division of political power to its present function as a principle for organizing all of life. And so we have what might be called the hyphenated democracies: economic democracy, social democracy, capitalist democracy, people's democracy, participatory democracy, sexual democracy, cultural democracy, even liberal democracy.

What must be questioned is what these compound terms mean, and what they say about democracy. It is clear that on the whole they use the immense prestige, the philosophical rhetoric, and the political trappings of democracy to advance particular social visions that are not necessarily democratic. A few explanations tell the story: economic democracy now means the achievement of socialism; social democracy means egalitarianism; capitalist democracy, free market economics; people's democracy, Stalinism; participatory democracy, the rule of a mob led by intellectuals; sexual democracy, libertinism; cultural democracy, the farther shores of behavioral relativism; even our own liberal democracy increasingly uses the appearances of tradition and conservatism to camouflage and make palatable a relentlessly secular and socially dynamic society.

These visions most often have their origins not in any historical understanding of a merely political democracy or in any sympathy with it, but rather in hostile attempts at the conquest of social power; the Marxist-Bolshevist transformation of democracy into dictatorship is a supreme example of this alchemy. But at least gross phenomena, by their very brutality, make resistance to them possible. Such now hardly seems the case in the relatively humane environments of the liberal democracies. Here expansive democracy sings a siren song, a song attractive to those whose yearnings stretch into the future rather than back into the past.

America in particular has been populated with those for whom a limited political definition of democracy has not been enough. Foremost among these evangelists in the name of a supra-political democratic ethos was, of course, Walt Whitman. For Whitman, writing in 1867 in *Democratic Vistas*, democracy was "the best, perhaps only, fit and full means, formulator, general caller-forth, trainer, for the millions, not for grand material personalities only, but for immortal souls." Democracy's task in culture was to conquer, and in its victory it was to take no prisoners:

> I say that democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil, until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists, or that has been produced anywhere in the past, under opposite influences.

So radical was democracy in Whitman's formulation that its culture was to be based, just as our contemporary definition would have it, on equal participation by, and equal contributions from, all. Consider the following lines from "I Hear America Singing," of which only the title is usually quoted:

> I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
> Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
> The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam . . .
>
> The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
> Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
> The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
> Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Here surely is Whitman's definitive statement, not simply of democratic culture, but of cultural democracy, the equalizing of all expression.

Thus Whitman's unfettered ejaculation of raw emotion, what he called his "barbaric yawp," now seems thoroughly modern in going beyond poetry to the imperatives of ideology; it is just as modern in the way his ideology ends up replacing the poetry with which it began. The result is surely not a statement of aesthetics, but of a world-encompassing and world-delivering crusade, a proclamation of democratic ideology as a way of life and in every sphere of life.

Here, already existing full-blown more than a century ago, is the definitive opposition to the Arnoldian idea of culture. Whitman's very title—*Democratic Vistas*—could not stand in greater contrast to Arnold's contemporaneous *Culture and Anarchy*. Whereas Whitman saw democracy not only as properly driving out everything past and present but as containing within itself every provision for the living of life, Arnold saw democracy as what he called "machinery," a mere set of contingent arrangements, among them a large population, abundant natural resources, an efficient transportation system, wealth, religious organization, and even freedom itself, providing a way to accomplish ends but not constituting any idea of the ends themselves. Because democracy, in Arnold's view, failed to provide transcendent values, its exercise without the external provision of values led inevitably to a collapse of social purpose and cohesion.

Because Arnold despised the organization of English society, in which he saw a hateful "spectacle of an upper class materialised, a middle class vulgarised, [and] a lower class brutalised," he was able to admire the achievement of American democracy in creating a very nearly classless society. But though Arnold was a friend of democracy, he did not confuse democracy with culture; he did not confuse political arrangements—even the best political arrangements—with the ends of man and society. For Arnold, it must be stressed, democracy was "machinery," and culture was the pursuit of the ends of life.

The evidence of the past century suggests that Arnold was indeed right in finding democracy incapable in itself of providing the ends of life, of generating the values by which a society and its citizens can live. And it is a measure of just how right Arnold was in this matter that the advocates of democracy have everywhere found it necessary to engage in the task of hyphenating, and thus transforming, a simple notion of democracy.

History has shown us the folly of making democracy the handmaiden of egalitarian and distributivist economics; it may well now be demonstrating the folly of making democracy and its freedoms the facilitator of pan-sexuality. In the area of culture, it is as yet little noticed how it is our practice of using democratic political arrangements in order to accomplish wider social goals that now exerts a terrible pressure on culture—defined, it must be stressed yet again, as the life of the mind. For example, it is the economic success achieved under democratic political arrangements that has created a market for mass entertainment that dwarfs other, more profound achievements of mind and spirit. Above all, it is the triumphant egalitarianism of democracy that under the pretext of equal access to culture alters, lowers, and finally destroys its content.

If culture—defined, it must be stressed, as the life of the mind—is thus to be inextricably tied to the ideology of democracy, then the implications for the relationship between culture and democracy are clear: culture and democracy cannot co-exist, for democracy by its nature represents the many, and culture, by its nature, is created by the few. What the many cannot immediately comprehend, they destroy; what the few cannot directly control, they reject. In sum, it is very difficult these days to resist the idea that, whereas the principal threat to culture was once perceived to come from the established order of status, wealth, and office, it now comes from another establish-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ment—a demagogic establishment that demands the unthinking and uncritical extension of democratic ideology into every area of intellectual and social life.

It is very tempting to derive from this analysis a wholesale condemnation of mass society, by which is meant the social life characteristic of modernity itself. This is a temptation we must resist. We must be clear that such a condemnation signifies nothing less than a rejection of the value of all social life from the beginnings of what is so quaintly called the Age of Reason to today. Unfortunately, as powerful and accurate as such a condemnation of modernity is in many of its diagnoses, it fails to take necessary account of the gains in the physical quality of human life, made possible by the achievements of the natural sciences and technology and made available through capitalism, and of the continuing ability of countless millions—despite the stresses of modernity—to carry on private life in a public maelstrom, to find personal meaning amidst the social chaos.

There is no need to remark here that mass society and modernity together represent an epochal movement in human history. They drown any Canute who dares to stand in their way. And yet, powerful as they are, they cannot be more than what we—all of us—make of them. Our present-day ideas of culture and democracy are prime fruits of modern thought; it can hardly be doubted that, insofar as society is concerned, the current, confused usage of the words culture and democracy expresses, in the most exact way, what the nineteenth century chose to call the *Zeitgeist*—the spirit of the age.

Still, there is every reason to question the current degraded definitions of culture and democracy and reflect on what culture and democracy might mean as words and as ideas. This questioning, in producing a redefinition of these key terms, can suggest what must be done in individual thought and individual action. Surely it is not quixotry to cite, in support of this necessary going it alone, the famous passage on such putatively lost causes from Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, a passage that powerfully encourages our seemingly foredoomed twentieth-century advocacy of an older idea of culture:

> Oxford, the Oxford of the past, has many faults, and she has heavily paid for them in defeat, in isolation, in want of hold upon the modern world. Yet we in Oxford, brought up amidst the beauty and sweetness of that beautiful place, have not failed to seize one truth,—the truth that beauty and sweetness are essential characters of a complete human perfection . . . [a]nd the sentiment is true, and has never been wholly defeated, and has shown its power even in its defeat. We have not won our political battles, we have not carried our main points, we have not stopped our adversaries' advance, we have not marched victoriously with the modern world; but we have told silently upon the mind of the country, we have prepared currents of feeling which sap our adversaries' position when it seems gained, we have kept up our own communications with the future.

Once we have made up our minds that there is purpose and grandeur in backing the right lost causes—not least because not all lost causes are, in the long run, truly lost—we must ask what, then, these great words might come to mean to us. What is necessary are definitions of culture and democracy based less on the muddling of definitions and more on their clarification, less on inclusions and more on exclusions, less on finding similarities between conflicting realities, concepts, and goals and more on recognizing the differences between them. Put another way, these two great words, culture and democracy, deserve to be defined by what they can accurately represent, rather than by what they can be made, through rhetoric and compromise, to accommodate.

Before we can begin to find a proper definition of culture, we must be clear about one thing: despite the fact that culture, as a word suggesting the finer things of life, still moves us, we can no longer expect its mere

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

invocation to manage the necessary revivification. There will be those who will say that what Emerson wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century is still true: "The word of ambition at the present day is Culture." But just how much times have changed is shown by the words Emerson added: "Whilst all the world is in pursuit of power, and of wealth as a means of power, culture corrects the theory of success." Unfortunately, the only aspect of culture as a word that has remained constant to the present day is its prestige—and it is in the nature of culture's prestige today that it is no longer a way of correcting what is in fact the worship of success; it is instead in the hands of its boosters a capitulation to the notion of success that for Emerson culture was destined to combat. We all, it seems, stand to attention for culture; but the culture we salute is not the arduous acquisition of the knowledge of greatness, but rather an easy way of occupying our lives without getting our hands dirty.

The time has come, then, to stop using the word "culture" to describe the totality of our past and present social experience. The time has also come to stop using "culture" to embrace and dignify every product of our own minds, no matter how ephemeral or how trivial, how vulgar or how coarse. Instead, let us consider an alternative to this debased idea of culture, the alternative to be found, for example, in Arnold. It is necessary to go against the stream and use this simple, lonely word to mean what it meant in what now seems the last hopeful period of Western civilization, the second half of the nineteenth century: the aspiration (in Arnold's formulation) to possess and live "the best that has been thought and known." This is not just a call for a return to Arnold; it is more important that it is a call for a return to hope.

In this definition, culture consists of the masterpieces of intellectual and aesthetic activity made transmissible in written words or in images possessing corporeal existence. The corpus of culture is ongoing and permanent. It is continuously subject to distillation and selection. It is in the short term fragile, but in the end it is all that remains of what we have done. Though culture may originate in any part of a society, its perpetuation is usually of necessity in the hands of a self-selecting and self-sacrificing remnant, Arnold's term for the guardians of righteousness; it is the function of this remnant to preserve culture, even when, as it all too often seems today, it seems so difficult to create.

Why, it may be asked, should we aspire to live the life of culture? Why this unremitting labor, this sacrifice of immediate and assured pleasures, this eternal pursuit of an unattainable perfection? Because culture, in an age when it is so hard to embrace the divine, when pursued in itself and on its own terms, represents our best secular means of transcendence; because of all worldly activity culture comes closest to revealing, and conserving, the best of which we are capable.

But there is yet more in the way of an answer to the question "why culture?" Culture encapsulates the most abstract and distilled achievements of what Arnold called "the humanisation of man in society." It is the genius of culture to use beauty—the beauty of words, sounds, images—to carry and transmit the most profound truths about our human lives. These truths, often though not always religious in origin, not only describe what we are; they describe what we should be. They are, in short, the highest values—of knowledge of good and evil, of liberty and discipline, of joy and sorrow, of righteousness, work, understanding, courage, loyalty, friendship, pity, love—values that we recognize and that we try to live. Because the verdict of history is that living a life of culture leads to the living of life itself; because culture, by enduring, can make us comprehend that life—not the lives of men, but the life of man—endures; because the life of culture embodies the values of life, it can teach us that all our lives are worth living.

Against this definition, it has often been noted that horrifying crimes have been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

committed in this century in the name of *Kultur* by those whose proud boast it was to speak for civilization. These crimes have cast a pall over the very possibility of the humanizing power of art and learning. With this tragic failure in mind, it would be all too easy for us to turn upon the very notion of civilization itself, and think that by giving up the heights of civilization we might trade culture for life. But to make such a choice would be to charge culture with the duty of transforming the instinctual core of man, and then to find culture guilty of failing to effect this transformation. To have this expectation of what can be no more than a fallible human process is to forsake the possible in favor of the impossible, the realizable in favor of the utopian. Culture, it cannot be repeated too often, is not a guarantee; it is a goal.

What of democracy? What might constitute a viable definition for this other great word of the age? A realistic definition of democracy makes one thing clear: democracy is a term describing a legal process through which political power is allocated through electoral means. In a functioning political democracy, politics is only a part, albeit a necessary part, of human life; politics is not the governing principle of life or its *raison d'être*. Neither politics nor democracy is to be construed as the end of life. By providing liberty, democracy makes the exercise of freedom possible; by providing a widely agreed-upon set of procedures, the pursuit of permanent values concerning the ends of life is made possible with a lessened danger of internecine conflict and slaughter.

Viewed in this way, extra-political values are not immanent in democracy. Democracy cannot properly impose any other values than those that regulate the conduct of public business. Democracy, taken by and in itself, has little or nothing to say either about how we should live or about how we should die; still less does democracy provide us, outside the world of political process, with "a way of life." Democracy does not provide the answers to the most important questions of life; it gives us the space, the time, the freedom, and above all the social peace in which to try to find these answers—elsewhere, in our personal lives, and in that realm of spirit we call culture.

Historically religion has been the primary source of mankind's highest values, and to say that a return to culture (as properly understood) is our hope is not to state that a culture of this world can replace a religion of the next. To place our hope in culture is merely to note that, as we speculate about possible new sources of transcendent values, we have no choice but to conserve and extend in art, in learning, in every realm of the spirit that which we have received from thousands of years of civilization and thus from religion itself.

We live in a time of big government, of big corporations, of big foundations, and of an immense and highly developed mass market. In recent years government, in response both to the power and the weakness of the private sphere, has assumed ever more of a leading role in culture. Just because government in the United States is responsive to political constituencies, there will inevitably be increasing pressures to use public power to make culture serve the needs of what I have called an all-encompassing definition of democracy. To capitulate to these pressures would be to reduce culture to a mere expression of the democratic impulse. To do so would mean both the end of culture and the triumph of politics over life.

Our need today is not for a forced unification of culture and democracy, but for their amicable separation, based upon a careful definition of, and respect for, what each can accomplish. When we speak—as we inevitably do in a political democracy—of democratic culture, we must be clear that we mean not, as Whitman demanded, a life of the mind coming equally from all and appealing equally to all, but a life of the mind available to all. We must always be careful to remember that while it is the task of democracy to govern, it is the task of culture to make the best sense we can, this side of eternity, of life itself.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dispossession, dreams, delusions: the poetry of John Berryman

by Bruce Bawer

His real name was, of all things, John Smith, and he was born in 1914 in McAlester, Oklahoma, the elder son and namesake of a man who, after failing miserably both as a small-town banker in that state and as the proprietor of a modest Tampa, Florida, eatery, shuffled off this mortal coil in 1926 by means of a self-inflicted bullet wound. His death was followed hard upon—within ten weeks, in fact—by his canny widow's marriage to the family's landlord, a prosperous bond salesman named John Angus McAlpin Berryman; and it was not long afterward that the new Mrs. Berryman divested both her children, eleven-year-old John and six-year-old Robert Jefferson, of their father's last name and Catholic religion, changed her own name from Martha May to Jill Angel, and relocated the newly formed Berryman clan to New York. Three years later, the stock market crash devastated John Angus and forced Jill Angel to go to work; but her adored elder son, now named John Allyn McAlpin Berryman, continued to receive a first-rate education: after being graduated from the South Kent School, an Episcopal boarding academy in Connecticut, he proceeded to make a mark for himself as an up-and-coming poet and literary man at Columbia College (where he studied under Mark Van Doren) and at Cambridge University (which he attended on a Kellett Fellowship).

Why a poet? The young man's intense, possessive mother—to whom he was tied by extraordinary bonds of mutual guilt, resentment, and love, and whose influence upon him, accordingly, was profound—had a special interest in literature. And Berryman seems to have needed *something* to put between himself and the ever-impinging thought of his father's suicide. For throughout his life, questions raged within him about that event's causes and aftermath. Had his father killed himself out of despair over his business reversals, or because his wife had become involved with another man? What exactly *was* the extent of Jill Angel's responsibility for his death? Why had she remarried so quickly? And why had he (the poet) allowed her to change his name? Far from helping to set his mind at ease, moreover, Berryman's dominating, adoring, and expertly manipulative mother served only to make matters worse: as Eileen Simpson, his first wife and most perceptive biographer, writes in her memoir *Poets in Their Youth* (1982), Jill Angel told Berryman that his father was "a failure not only as a breadwinner but also as a lover," an indiscretion which (in Simpson's view) gave the poet "a damaging view of his father's manliness and, by extension, his own." One cannot, of course, make causal connections with absolute certitude, but the fact is that by his teens Berryman had developed a self-destructiveness as real as his father's: he attempted suicide at prep school, and threatened to kill himself at various times

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over the ensuing years. In Simpson's words, suicide was throughout his adult life "a kind of undertow, sucking at him, sometimes feebly, sometimes with terrifying strength."

And it was poetry, during Berryman's early adulthood, that provided him with the chief means of resisting that undertow. Amid the torment of muddled memories and turbulent reflections, poetry represented a principle of order, a means of curbing unstable tendencies. T. S. Eliot, of course, had explained it all years earlier. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), Eliot had proclaimed that "[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." Eliot was, needless to say, the premier literary authority not only for Berryman but for his entire generation; but to the haunted and fervently Anglophilic young poet from McAlester, Oklahoma, the eminent London literary man who had managed to put the Eliots of St. Louis behind him and to transform himself magically into an Englishman must have made an especially powerful impression. Certainly Berryman brought to his art the high seriousness that Eliot demanded: as Simpson recalls, "[t]he important thing, the real thing, the *only* thing was to write poetry. All else was wasted time." And Berryman's early poetry makes it clear that he took Old Possum's famous pronouncements on poetry as gospel (and took them, it might be added, even more literally than did Eliot himself), dutifully heeding Eliot's directive, in "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), to "be *difficult*," to "become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect." Published in *Five Young American Poets* (1940), *Poems* (1942), and *The Dispossessed* (1948), Berryman's early lyrics—almost all of which are formal and impersonal, elevated in diction and ambitious in range of reference, and preternaturally somber—patently reflect the earnest and arduous effort of a young man eager to be the most comprehensive, allusive, and indirect poet around. But these poems reflect other influences, too—notably those of W. H. Auden and William Butler Yeats (the latter of whom Berryman idolized). The most characteristic of Berryman's early poems, indeed, read like agglomerations of stylistic tics and pet phrases from all three of these elder poets, the poems' very titles alternately suggesting Eliot ("Rock-Study with Wanderer," "World-Telegram"), Yeats ("Ceremony and Vision," "The Animal Trainer"), and Auden ("1 September 1939").

Yet to say that the young Berryman's stylistic and formal choices were heavily influenced by Yeats and Auden is not to say that he shared their ideas about poetry. The difference between, say, Berryman's "1 September 1939" and Auden's "September 1, 1939" (aside from the amusing fact that the Anglophile Berryman used the British system of date notation, and the English expatriate Auden followed American practice) is instructive: for all its concern with international events, Auden's poem represents a direct, colloquial, and personal response to the Nazi invasion of Poland, even beginning with the first person pronoun:

> I sit in one of the dives
> On Fifty-Second Street
> Uncertain and afraid
> As the clever hopes expire
> Of a low dishonest decade:
> Waves of anger and fear
> Circulate over the bright
> And darkened lands of the earth,
> Obsessing our private lives;
> The unmentionable odour of death
> Offends the September night.

In the succeeding stanzas, Auden generalizes about man and history, drawing the conclusion that "We must love one another or die." Yet for all his talk of "Democracy" and "Collective Man," he doesn't lose sight of people themselves, the "dense commuters," the "helpless governors," and the "man-in-the-street" who share culpability for the day's tragedy; and he ends the poem where he began, with himself:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

Berryman's poem, by contrast, begins by eliminating the human dimension of the events of September 1. Instead of people dropping bombs on people, we find

The first, scattering rain on Polish cities.
That afternoon a man squat' on the shore
Tearing a square of shining cellophane.
Some easily, some in evident torment tore,
Some for a time resisted, and then burst.
All this depended on fidelity . . .
One was blown out and borne off by
the waters,
The man was tortured by the sound of
rain.

The poem continues for two more stanzas in this allegorical vein, portraying the Soviet Union as a "Bear [that] crept under the Eagle's wing" and Nazi Germany as "the Eagle [that] soared and dropt." The differences between this poem and Auden's are striking: whereas Auden's reads like a profoundly felt response to the German attack, Berryman's reads like the work of an ambitious young poet who has self-consciously chosen a towering subject and is out to be as clever about it as he can. If Auden, in other words, draws straightforward connections between the invasion and real people in the real world, Berryman attempts to make ingenious metaphorical connections in the manner of the Metaphysical poets, representing bombs as rain, a continent as a piece of cellophane, two totalitarian states as a pair of animals. Yet one would hardly confuse this poem with anything by Donne; its imagery comes off not as fresh and witty but as pretentious and derivative—its title adapted from Auden, its eight-line stanza borrowed from Yeats, its rain metaphor and at least one turn of phrase ("His shadow/Lay on the sand before him") reminiscent of *The Waste Land*.

The impersonal route, then, wasn't very well suited to the tragic personal history and the idiosyncratic gifts with which fate had outfitted Berryman. There are, to be sure, several fine poems in these early collections; but the best tend to be those in which he rejects secondhand methods and grandiose themes and chooses not to escape emotion but to embrace it. One thinks particularly of "World's Fair" and "Fare Well," in both of which he allows himself to vent disturbing thoughts of his father: "Suddenly in torn images I trace/The inexhaustible ability of a man/Loved once, long lost, still to prevent my peace,/Still to suggest my dreams and starve horizon." In form as well as manner, both poems seem to anticipate *The Dream Songs*, which he began writing in 1955. Even more suggestive of Berryman's celebrated long poem is a sequence of three-stanza, eighteen-line poems called "The Nervous Songs," in which Berryman tries on a variety of whimsical, eccentric personas—a young Hawaiian, a demented priest, a tortured girl. The chattiness, the regular but flexible form, and the attempt at playfulness and irreverence all foreshadow *The Dream Songs*; but these early songs are just not very absorbing, perhaps because the characters and their stories were too removed from Berryman's own life to arouse in him the wit and pathos and urgency that characterize the finest of the *Dream Songs*.

All poetic careers that stretch out over decades undergo conspicuous modulations of some kind or another—changes in style, in tone, in subject matter. But the phases of Berryman's career are more distinct than most. His first major transition took place in 1947, when, over the course of a brief, intense extramarital affair, he composed a sequence of over a hundred sonnets that would not appear in print until twenty years later, under the title *Berryman's Sonnets*. In the newly published *Collected Poems*,[1] these

1 *Collected Poems 1937-1971*, by John Berryman; edited and introduced by Charles Thornbury; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 348 pages, $25.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poems are labeled *Sonnets to Chris,* marking the first time that the pseudonymous lover "Lise" of the 1967 book has been given her real name. These are odd poems: Berryman's tone swings from the elevated to the vernacular (and, not infrequently, the bawdy) and back again, all within the rigorously heeded constraints of the Petrarchan sonnet form. Read from a four-decades-later perspective, these poems strike one mainly as warm-ups for *The Dream Songs*. Yet their speaker—though plainly tormented by life and love in the same way as Berryman's *Dream Songs* alter ego, Henry—is a good deal more mindful than Henry of conventional literary etiquette; poetry remains, for him, something of a shield against the self-destructive impulse. At times, indeed, one has the feeling that the only thing standing between Berryman and outright lunacy is his all-subsuming desire to finish off the sonnet at hand with a firm, coherent sestet.

It is clear, in any event, that Berryman the sonneteer was still mostly in thrall to the Eliotic idea of poetry. The sonnets are dense with exotic verbiage, with Metaphysical conceits, and with imitations and parodies of other poets (among them such masters of the form as Shakespeare, Wyatt, and Petrarch). They are dense, too, with highfalutin historical, cultural, and literary allusions, some of which seem thematically pertinent and some of which seem extraneous and mechanical. (The affair, he writes, began in "middle March"—an allusion to George Eliot that has no purpose other than to look clever.) Frequently the sonnets appear to be straining in two opposite directions: straining, that is, to sound cultivated and ingenious, and straining also to seem eccentric, funny, spontaneous, chockablock with personality. And there are times, alas, when the straining is all that one notices.

What's more, Berryman's apparent intentions notwithstanding, the sonnets rarely strike one as having much to do with love—unless, of course, one means a deeply neurotic self-love (which is balanced, as it were, by an equally deep and equally neurotic self-hatred). Too often, in these poems where the *I*s and *me*s typically outnumber the *you*s, Berryman comes off as glib, insincere, self-dramatizing, his putative devotion to Chris merely a handy excuse for reckless emotional excess and for the mass production of sonnets. And too often the inverted syntax that would become a familiar (and generally engaging) characteristic of *The Dream Songs* seems, in the sonnets, to be deployed largely for purposes of meter or rhyme:

> I lift—lift you five States away your glass,
> Wide of this bar you never graced, where none
> Ever I know came, where what work is done
> Even by these men I know not . . .

In sonnet 47, Berryman speaks of "[c]rumpling a syntax at a sudden need." This skill would figure importantly in his art. But at the time of the sonnets' composition it was a skill that he was still in the process of developing.

Berryman's only volume of poetry in the Fifties was *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956), a meticulously crafted, tightly packed poem of 456 lines that was five years in the writing, and that Edmund Wilson hailed upon its publication as "the most distinguished long poem by an American since *The Waste Land*." The poem consists mostly of a monologue by the colonial New England poet Anne Bradstreet, whom Berryman imagines himself summoning, as it were, from out of Spiritus Mundi: "Out of maize & air/your body's made, and moves. I summon, see,/from the centuries it." Cosmic communion having been established, Berryman's voice gives way in the fifth stanza to Bradstreet's, and she proceeds without further ado to describe her existence in the New World: the ruggedness of life on the edge of an alien wilderness, the joys and tribulations of marriage and motherhood, the succor of Christian belief ("God awaits us"), and the composition of poetry ("quaternion on quaternion, tireless

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I phrase/anything past, dead, far,/sacred, for a barbarous place"). At one point Berryman interrupts to engage her in a dialogue, wanly contesting her faith—"I cannot feel myself God waits . . . . Man is entirely alone/may be"—and declaring his love for her. It is he, too, whose voice closes the poem:

> O all your ages at the mercy of my loves
> together lie at once, forever or
> so long as I happen.
> In the rain of pain & departure, still
> Love has no body and presides the sun,
> and elfs from silence melody. I run.
> Hover, utter, still,
> a sourcing whom my lost candle like the
> firefly loves.

This stanza—which, like the fifty-six that precede it, strictly follows the intricate, exacting eight-line form that Berryman devised for the poem—is typical of *Homage*'s lyricism as well as of its frequent obscurity. The poem swarms with recondite words, with nouns and adjectives used as verbs ("One proud tug greens Heaven"), with trimmed-down adverbs ("Women sleep sound"), and with taut, sinewy, heavily punctuated, and syntactically contorted sentences. Berryman also incorporates snippets of Bradstreet's own poetry, though the voice in which she speaks is very much his own creation. It's a remarkable poem, impressively and beautifully crafted, and represents the closest that Berryman would ever come to the controlled passion of, say, Lowell's *Life Studies* or Jarrell's *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* (to name books by two of Berryman's contemporaries and closest friends). But its control, unlike that in Lowell's and Jarrell's books, seems hard won; it *reads* like a poem that took five years to write, a poem that from the outset was intended to be nothing less than "the most distinguished long poem by an American since *The Waste Land*." It also reads, after Berryman's early lyrics and sonnets, like a last, monumental attempt to be a rigorously formal and impersonal poet. Berryman claimed to have fallen in love with Bradstreet while writing the poem, and the fact that lines from his sonnets reappear in *Homage* addressed to the Puritan poet makes one suspect that *Homage* was, in part, the product of an obstinate desire to find a more impersonal way of making poetry out of what Berryman must then have considered to be the overly personal materials of the sonnets. What is telling, however, is that Berryman could not help but inject himself into the poem, however briefly; and his fleeting declaration to Bradstreet of his love and despair seems to anticipate the tone and persona of *The Dream Songs* more surely than anything he had yet published.

It was at about the time of the publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* that Berryman began writing *The Dream Songs*. He would continue writing them for the rest of his life, much as Whitman kept revising *Song of Myself* and Pound kept adding to the *Cantos*. The comparison is fitting because, like those poems, *The Dream Songs* is a personal epic with a decidedly American personality; to read it on the heels of Berryman's earlier poems is to get the impression that the poet, after trying for so long to bring objective order to his verse, finally accepted—as did Pound in the *Cantos*—the fact that he could not "make it cohere." This is not to suggest, of course, that Berryman abandoned the idea of form. Though *The Dream Songs* as a whole can hardly be said to have a preordained shape, the individual songs themselves observe a form that, while making specific demands of the poet, is at the same time considerably more elastic than, say, an English sonnet. The typical song consists of three six-line stanzas, in each of which the first, second, fourth, and fifth lines usually approximate iambic pentameter, and the third and sixth lines tend to be shorter; there may be rhymes or slant rhymes within each stanza, though no particular scheme predominates.

The quality of the songs varies enormously. Too often, the humor shades into cuteness, the wit into easy flippancy, and the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

childlike candor into infantile display. At their best, however, the songs are singularly moving. Abounding in clever, seemingly effortless, and often nearly imperceptible patterns of rhyme, the most estimable of them reverberate with life and feeling, their splendidly supple style capable of conveying humor in one line and pathos in the next with what often seems the greatest of ease. It should be mentioned that while the songs are highly intimate, Berryman insisted that they were not about him at all; responding in a prefatory note to the second (and final) volume of songs, *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968), to some critics of the first volume, *77 Dream Songs* (1964), Berryman maintained that the poem "is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr Bones and variants thereof." But this is nonsense: as Joel Conarroe has written in his book-length study of Berryman, "anyone who reads the songs carefully will reject the assertion that they are about an imaginary character—some details, of course, are invented, but the sequence adheres closely to the facts of the poet's life and mind."

Why, then, did Berryman insist on Henry's separate identity? One reason may be that, as an impersonal poet of long standing, Berryman felt more comfortable hiding behind a persona, however transparent; the invention of Henry, in other words, may well have made it easier for him to be himself—to be, by turns, maudlin, obnoxious, charming, paranoid, poignant, and embarrassingly confessional, continually addressing us as "pal" or "friend," like a chummy, garrulous, dipsomaniacal stranger in a bar. (Indeed, the usual tone of Henry's monologues might fairly be described as a cross between drunk talk and baby talk.) The stranger can, at times, be wildly funny, whether he is parodying the halting oratory of President Eisenhower in "The Lay of Ike" ("Here's to the glory of the Great White—awk—/who has been running—er—er—things in recent—ech—") or making fun of the annual MLA convention (for which "[w]e are assembled here in the capital/city for Dull") or recounting his almost irresistible lust for a fellow diner at a restaurant, where

> only the fact of her husband & four other
> people
> kept me from springing on her
>
> or falling at her little feet and crying
> 'You are the hottest one for years of night
> Henry's dazed eyes
> have enjoyed, Brilliance.'

But he is mostly depressed, and the poem that he proffers, while volubly addressing such themes as love, fame, and God (and even, now and then, recording cherished moments of joy and tranquility), is predominantly a poem of loss, of mourning. Henry mourns his poet friends Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, and R. P. Blackmur; he mourns the literary masters Yeats and Frost and Eliot; and, as Conarroe writes, he's "in mourning for his own disorderly life." Then there is his late father, who is the object of both extraordinary rancor ("I spit upon this dreadful banker's grave/who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn/. . . /When will indifference come, I moan & rave") and genuine compassion:

> Also I love him: me he's done no wrong
> for going on forty years—forgiveness time—
> I touch now his despair . . .
>
> I cannot read that wretched mind, so strong
> & so undone. I've always tried. I—I'm
> trying to forgive
> whose frantic passage, when he could not live
> an instant longer, in the summer dawn
> left Henry to live on.

Aside from illustrating the striking degree to which Berryman bares his soul in *The*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dream Songs, this passage provides a good example of the poem's stylistic eccentricities. The seeming omission, in its closing sentence, of the one or two extra words that would make it sound like ordinary prose (i.e., "I'm trying to forgive *the man* whose frantic passage . . .") is typical of *The Dream Songs*. Whether calculated or not, such shorthand locutions can be oddly expressive and touching; one thinks, for instance, of the fourth and eighth lines of a song lamenting the death of Delmore Schwartz:

> Henry's mind grew blacker the more he thought.
> He looked onto the world like the act of an aged whore.
> Delmore, Delmore.
> He flung to pieces and they hit the floor.
> Nothing was true but what Marcus Aurelius taught,
> 'All that is foul smell & blood in a bag.'
>
> He lookt on the world like the leavings of a hag.
> Almost his love died from him, any more.
> His mother & William
> were vivid in the same mail Delmore died.
> The world is lunatic. This is the last ride.
> Delmore, Delmore.

Then there are the songs in which Berryman shifts tone with what can only be called mastery. For example, Dream Song 15, in which Henry reflects that women are emotionally stronger than men and offers, by way of support, an obscenely funny anecdote about a "haughtful & greasy" wench overheard in a bar, comes to an unexpectedly moving conclusion with two statements, the latter of which plainly refers to his father: "Some [men] hang heavy on the sauce,/ some invest in the past, one hides in the land./Henry was not his favourite." And there are songs that surprise one with their lyricism, with an unforgettable line or two: "Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so./After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,/we ourselves flash and yearn . . . ."

Yet the songs can also be sloppy, slack, overly dependent on cheap shock value or on bad puns. (In one song, for instance, the bar-happy Henry speaks of himself as being "past puberty & into pub-erty.") And then there's what one may call the race question. Henry, in Berryman's own words, is "sometimes in blackface," which is to say that at times his chatter has a minstrel-show flavor. Why? Perhaps because, having made the Atlantic crossing with Anne Bradstreet and discovered himself to be not a pseudo-Englishman like Eliot but an American poet like Whitman and Pound, the ever-alienated Berryman found it appropriate, upon starting in on *The Dream Songs*, to identify his alter ego with the most isolated segment of American society, namely the black subculture.[2] But *minstrel-show* talk? It is no surprise that Berryman has been accused by some critics of racial insensitivity, and one wouldn't want to have to defend him from the charge. But this insensitivity, if such it is, is only part of a larger problem with *The Dream Songs*: namely, that Berryman is almost invariably so engulfed in his own emotions that the feelings of other people—black or white, male or female, poet or non-poet—don't even enter into the picture. The songs teem with evidence to support the judgment of Allen Tate—one of the poet's closest friends—that Berryman "never grew up"; and anyone forced to read *The Dream Songs* from cover to cover can well understand Jeffrey Meyers's complaint in his book *Manic Power* that they "are simply paranoid projections of childhood manias and obsessions."

To put it somewhat more gently, if Berryman's early poems represented, for him, a means of resisting the "undertow" of suicide, by the time of *The Dream Songs* poetry had become rather a means of

2 Certainly Berryman had a lifelong tendency to identify with minority groups: his most well-known short story, "The Imaginary Jew" (1945)—which was based on an actual incident that affected Berryman very strongly and that remained with him for the rest of his life—concerns a man who, on his way across a park in New York City, finds himself "accused" by several strangers of being a Jew.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

recording his struggle with it. "The older you get," he observes in Dream Song 185, "at once/the better death looks and/the more fearful & intolerable." "Can I go on?" he asks in Dream Song 159. "Maybe it's time/to throw in my own hand." But he has an answer to his own suggestion: "there are secrets, secrets, I may yet—/hidden in history & theology, hidden in rhyme—/ come on to understand."

History and theology are, in fact, the twin quarries in which Berryman goes prospecting in *Love & Fame* (1970), the first book of his poetry to appear after the extraordinary success of *The Dream Songs*. Yet it's a messy, disorganized expedition: if *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* had taken five years to write, the composition of the much longer *Love & Fame* is said to have occupied only five or six weeks' time, and after reading the book one can only wonder that it took that long. The first three of the book's four sections consist mostly of narrative poems about Berryman's life at Columbia, at Cambridge, and in later years, and virtually all of these poems are composed in appallingly slack, conversational free-verse quatrains. There is little artfulness in the selection of words or details; it is quite clear that these rambling and diaristic poems aspire, above all, not to an ideal of consummate artistry but to one of unmitigated honesty. Accordingly, some of them consist largely of pallid alumni-magazine reminiscences, studded with book titles and the names of friends, professors, intellectual heroes:

> I began the historical study of the Gospel
> indebted above all to Guignebert
> & Goguel & McNeile
> & Bultmann even & later Archbishop
> Carrington.
>
> The Miracles were a stumbling-block;
> until I read Karl Heim, trained in natural
> science;
> until I had sufficiently attended to
> The Transfiguration & The Ecstasy.

Other poems, meanwhile, contain gratuitous and vulgar locker-room anecdotes: Berryman tells how many women he slept with during his early manhood, tells about a college friend's meager genitalia, tells (in a flippant parenthesis) about his own illegitimate child. The general point of all this, when there seems to be one, is to underline the hopelessness of love, the futility of fame. (The book's title probably derives from the last line of Keats's poem "When I Have Fears": "Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.") But for the most part there doesn't seem to *be* a point to these poems: if in *The Dream Songs* there is the slightest vestige of an intention to make a universal statement about man and art, or life and death, Berryman manages in *Love & Fame* to write poems in which such a motive is well-nigh inconceivable.

Nor do these poems have a great deal to recommend them aesthetically. Passages from any given poem might easily be rearranged, deleted, moved to other poems, without any apparent loss. Nor, for all the sensational aspects, does the book itself even add up to a moderately compelling self-portrait in verse: for in abandoning the persona of Henry, Berryman also, alas, seems to have jettisoned much of the personality that went with it. When, in *The Dream Songs*, Berryman wants to emphasize the absurdity of hungering for fame, he does it in a rather charming fashion, remembering how he and Delmore Schwartz, in their youth, "were almost anonymous/waiting for fame to descend/with a scarlet mantle & tell us who we were." *Love & Fame* has little charm of this sort, less wit, and virtually no imagination. When Berryman is drinking, threatened with separation, and possessed by reflections on suicide and his father, all he can think of to say is—well—exactly that: "Reflexions on suicide, & on my father, possess me./I drink too much. My wife threatens separation." As these lines suggest, this is a grim book, especially in Part Three—which concerns Berryman's post-Cambridge years, and whose poems have titles like "Damned," "Of Suicide," "Death

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ballad," and "Purgatory"—and in Part Four, "Eleven Addresses to the Lord," in which the increasingly erratic Berryman, who claimed to have undergone "a sort of religious conversion" in the spring of 1970, offers his doubts and prayers up to God:

> If I say Thy name, art Thou there? It may
> be so.
> Thou art not absent-minded, as I am.
> I am so much so I had to give up driving.

Whatever Berryman's intention in these lines, their effect is both ludicrous and distressing. And in fact, as one reads through the post-*Dream Songs* collections, Berryman's poems seem less and less the spirited, imaginative record of a struggle against the undertow of suicidal impulses, and increasingly the stark whimpers and cries of a drowning man. The irony is sharp: *The Dream Songs* had won every major poetry award—a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, a Bollingen—but once that work was past him, the now less-than-vigorous Berryman (who was hospitalized for alcoholism treatments several times between 1967 and 1970) appeared not to know what to do next. The posthumously published *Delusions etc of John Berryman* (1972) finds the poet still dwelling morbidly upon his earthly father's suicide, and still addressing his heavenly Father in a baffling and borderline delusionary way. The only thing that seems worth saying about the supposedly religious poems in this haphazard assortment—and, for that matter, about those in *Love & Fame*—is that they appear to be about God in precisely the same way that the *Sonnets to Chris* are about Chris. One hesitates to question the sincerity of anyone's religious ardor, but it must be said that Berryman, in his supposed enthusiasm for God, looks very much like a man grasping at a handy excuse to indulge himself in candid confession, in litanies of loss and longing, and in untempered, self-dramatizing apocalyptic rhetoric. Berryman's poems are at once too slipshod to be characterized, the way one would characterize the poems of Donne or Herbert, as beautiful objects created to the greater glory of God, and too flat and earthbound to be categorized as mystical or visionary.

The most provocative item in *Henry's Fate and Other Poems* (1977)—an assemblage of Berryman's previously uncollected poems and fragments—is less of literary than of biographical interest. It is a Dream Song that Berryman wrote on January 5, 1972, two days before leaping to his death from the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis:

> I didn't. And I didn't. Sharp the Spanish blade
> to gash my throat after I'd climbed across
> the high railing of the bridge
> to tilt out, with the knife in my right hand
> to slash me knocked or fainting till I'd fall
> unable to keep my skull down but fearless
>
> unless my wife wouldn't let me out of
> the house,
> unless the cops noticed me crossing the
> campus
> up to the bridge
> & clappt me in for observation, costing
> my job—
> I'd be now in a cell, costing my job—
> well, I missed that;
>
> but here's the terror of tomorrow's lectures
> bad in themselves, the students dropping the
> course,
> the Administration hearing
> & offering me either a medical leave of
> absence
> or resignation—Kitticat, they can't fire me—

The undertow had gotten him at last.

It should not, of course, have surprised anyone. "The artist is extremely lucky," Berryman had once quipped in an interview, "who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him." While there is some truth in this remark, it also bespeaks a neurotic compulsion, on Berryman's part, to abuse his brittle nerves, to make a fetish of intensity, to dive deep. (It would seem to have been the second great

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tragedy of Berryman's life—the first, naturally, being his father's suicide—that he inherited both his father's fragile nervous system and his temperamentally hardy mother's stubborn tendency to overburden it.) And while it could be argued that there was something truly heroic in Berryman's ability to create powerful imaginative works in staunch defiance of the urge to self-destruct, the tendency among many critics these days, alas, is to romanticize those self-destructive attitudes themselves.

I wouldn't necessarily describe Charles Thornbury, the editor of Berryman's *Collected Poems*, as such a critic, though his long, unconditionally worshipful introduction to the poems often hovers a bit too close to the frontiers of coherence, referring earnestly and without explanatory or critical comment to Berryman's "effort to turn suffering on itself," to the poet's desire "to replace his intensity of loss with an intensity of grace," and suchlike. Thornbury, an associate professor at St. John's University in Minnesota who (the dust jacket informs us) "is presently [*sic*] working on a full-scale critical biography of John Berryman," has given his subject the full scholarly treatment, providing the publication histories of all the poetry volumes whose contents have been included here and assiduously noting hundreds of variant renderings in the sundry typescripts, manuscripts, carbons, galleys, and page proofs that he has managed to track down.

What is particularly surprising, though, is what Thornbury does not include. He includes no previously unpublished or uncollected poems; he includes nothing from *Henry's Fate* (because, he explains, it was not selected and arranged by Berryman); and—though the title of the *Collected Poems* would seem to promise otherwise—he does not include *The Dream Songs*. (The rationale for this is that the combined edition of *77 Dream Songs* and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, originally published in 1969, remains in print as a separate volume.) Nor has he sifted through Berryman's published poems and separated the wheat from the chaff. What he has done, quite simply, is to publish the complete contents of each of the collections of short poems that Berryman assembled during his lifetime, plus *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. It's a handsome volume, I suppose, and I'm sure we should all be glad that Thornbury has regularized Berryman's quotation marks, worked out the proper spacing for his ellipses, and so forth, but somehow all this apparatus looks like needless clutter, like some sort of grotesque academic make-work project. Who, one wonders, came to the decision that such an edition was called for? Why should the name of an associate professor at St. John's University in Minnesota be on the cover of John Berryman's collected poems? And why, if it was felt that the time had come for a collected Berryman, wasn't someone engaged to winnow out the worst of Berryman's truly bad poems? One can only hope that the next major assemblage of a contemporary poet's oeuvre will bear a somewhat closer resemblance to, say, Elizabeth Bishop's simple and elegant *Complete Poems* (1983) than to this formidable-looking scholarly document from whose dust jacket the bearded face of John Berryman stares out so dolefully.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

O pioneers!: Picasso & Braque 1907-1914

by Karen Wilkin

In the spring of 1907, Georges Braque visited the studio of Pablo Picasso for the first time. In the years that followed, the two artists, apparently so unlike in background, temperament, and possibly even in aesthetic, became essential to each other, forging a relationship that was part intimate friendship, part rivalry, part two-man expedition into the unknown. The young men were constantly in each other's studio, scrutinizing each other's work, challenging, stimulating, and encouraging each other. They went off to paint in different places and returned to compare results. They invented nicknames for each other, shared jokes and pranks, dressed up in each other's clothes and took photographs. Along the way they invented a new language of painting that destroyed time-honored conventions of representation: they invented what came to be known as Cubism.

The remarkable symbiosis between the two artists is the subject of the exhibition "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism," organized by William Rubin, director emeritus of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art.[1] It's a wonderful show—intelligent, illuminating, tightly focused, comprehensive. Best of all, the exhibition makes its point not with rhetoric, but with the inexorable accumulation of visual evidence. Picasso and Braque said little about the years they spent together and left little written documentation. They wished to be judged by what they made rather than by what they said, and, happily, "Pioneering Cubism" allows us to do just that, with what must be an ideal selection of works assembled from literally everywhere—private and public collections across Europe and the United States, from the Eastern Bloc and Japan—and sensitively juxtaposed. Praising an exhibition for permitting the art to speak for itself should be unnecessary, but the current fashion in museum exhibitions for treating paintings and sculptures as illustrations of theory makes Rubin's approach noteworthy. We can only hope that it will serve as a model for his successors at the Museum of Modern Art.

"Pioneering Cubism" makes the viewer work. It includes nearly four hundred works—paintings, drawings, *papiers collés*, constructions, prints—all produced in the relatively short time between March or April 1907, when Picasso and Braque first met, and August 1914, when Picasso saw his friend off to war at the Avignon railroad station. It's a large show with no padding. Not all the works are on the same level, but the lesser efforts often clarify just what Picasso and Braque were after and underline just how extraordinary the masterpieces are. "Pioneering Cubism" requires concentration and certainly more than one visit. The works in question are complex, severe, not

1 "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism" is on view at the Museum of Modern Art until January 16, 1990. It will not travel after it closes in New York.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

overtly seductive; their palette is frequently austere, their structure difficult. And there is a sense of intellectual or perhaps aesthetic pressure about the show. It's the first time that this crucial aspect of Cubism has been the subject of an exhibition and, since we are unlikely ever to see these works together again, "Pioneering Cubism" demands doubly that we pay close attention.

Curiously, for anyone who has studied art history, many of the works are so familiar that it requires an effort to *see* them rather than merely recognize them. In 1989, Cubism doesn't shock the way it did earlier in this century. We are all sophisticated enough not to be disturbed by fragmented forms, not to equate shattered images with literal violence. Even Picasso's aggressive primitivism is less startling than it must have been in 1907, although *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, even imprisoned under glass as it is for this exhibition, remains an arresting and disquieting picture. But we know all about Cubism. We can glibly discuss multiple views, tipped space, transparent planes, dissected form, and all the rest of it. Knowing about Cubism is simply part of visual literacy. The reduced palette of the early years can still be discomfiting (a member of MOMA's board is supposed to have referred to the show as "all those little brown pictures"), but even that is understood by formalists as a deliberate restriction that allowed concentration on issues rather than color and by contextualists as evidence of the artists' poverty, since earth colors are the cheapest available. I've had art history students complain about having to spend so much time on Cubism in courses on twentieth-century art, declaring that once they had grasped its principles, nothing more need be said, and adding that they didn't see how they could be expected to tell a 1911 Braque from a 1912 Picasso in any event.

If we look hard, "Pioneering Cubism" makes it plain that there is a great deal more to be said. The exhibition breaks down conventional wisdom, makes us question our assumptions. Telling Braque from Picasso becomes obvious—except when each seems to have tried deliberately to paint like the other—if we pay close enough attention. "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism" is clearly the definitive statement on the subject. It changes forever how we see Cubist pictures, even how we think about Picasso and Braque.

The popular notion that Picasso was the leader, the protean inventor in whose shadow Braque labored, turns out to be untrue. But it's not surprising that Picasso should be assumed to have been the dominant figure, even in such a patently cooperative effort as the development of Cubism. Picasso's astonishing virtuosity, his productivity, his razzle-dazzle changes of style all lay claim to the imagination. His life is littered with the stuff of the novels they sell in supermarkets—discarded mistresses, illegitimate children, a suicidal widow—to say nothing of the palatial houses stuffed with art, the studios in which nothing was allowed to be touched. "Picasso" is the nearest thing we have to a household word for modern art or, at least, for the modern artist. Braque, by contrast, seems a plodding fellow. He demands to be judged by his art, not his life. He lived unostentatiously, stayed married to the same woman until his death, left no agonized journals, no litigious offspring. Braque simply devoted himself to painting. Period. He explored a far narrower range of territory in his art than Picasso did, single-mindedly pursuing the implications of Cubism for most of his life, but he did so with a seriousness, lucidity, and intensity that make his best pictures unforgettable. In "Pioneering Cubism," Braque's intelligence and importance are immediately visible. So are his originality and his ability to invent. Braque was manifestly an equal partner in the Cubist venture, not a follower. It's not simply a question of who did what first—although Braque is demonstrably the inventor of some crucial notions—but of how limits were expanded, how faint suggestions were carried to full realization.

In the view of William Rubin in his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

excellent catalogue essay, "Braque is one of the great modern painters, but we must go back to the most prodigious Renaissance masters for the like of Picasso."[2] Nonetheless, Rubin says, qualitative distinction is beside the point. What matters is the unique dialogue between the two artists, a dialogue that extended over six years and permitted or forced the evolution of Cubism. In the catalogue, Rubin declares that his purpose "will be not so much to argue the relative merits of these artists as to suggest the manner in which precisely their differences, in temperament, mind, and pictorial gift, contributed to a shared vision of painting that found them both at their best when they were closest to one another—a vision which neither, I am convinced, could have realized alone."

Braque, just short of his twenty-fifth birthday when he met Picasso, was intensely French, a sturdy Norman from Le Havre, from a family of house painters and decorators. He had come to Paris originally to widen his repertoire of decorative painting techniques for the benefit of the family business. With only a smattering of formal fine art training, Braque owed his visual sophistication initially to his friends Othon Friesz and Raoul Dufy, who introduced him to Fauvist ideas; but at the time of Braque's first meeting with Picasso, the most powerful influence on him was Cézanne. Deeply impressed by the 1907 exhibitions honoring Cézanne, who had died the previous year, Braque had gone on a pilgrimage to the south of France, painting in "Cézanne's places." As we can see from the works in the exhibition's introductory section, Braque was attempting to solidify the color patches of Fauvism into a more rational articulation of form. The pictures from this period offer graphic evidence of a new clarity and angularity of structure in Braque's paintings before he met Picasso, a new sense of underlying geometry and solidity that began to take precedence over intense color contrasts.

At the time of their meeting, Picasso was still something of an outsider, small, fierce, notorious for his erratic French and his persistent Spanishness, if Gertrude Stein and other contemporary observers are to be believed. Only six months older than Braque, Picasso was a far more accomplished artist, a virtuoso with thorough academic training who had been raised among artists. Like Braque, Picasso was striving for more rigor in his paintings. By 1907 he had completely rejected the delicacy and near-sentimentality of his Blue and Rose period pictures and, as Rubin's selection of introductory work demonstrates, he had already begun to simplify and harden forms to the point of making them appear crude or brutal. Picasso was certainly aware of Cézanne's work when he met Braque, but his own self-imposed apprenticeship was to less civilized art: the pared-down geometry of Iberian sculpture and the abrupt, unpredictable forms of African carving.

These affinities between the two artists were no doubt what inspired Braque to write "anticipated memories" on the visiting card he left, in Picasso's absence, on his initial studio visit; yet the differences between them were vast and remain readily apparent. Braque, lacking Picasso's facility, spent months on his canvases, adjusting, altering, refining. He saw his pictures through to the end, rather than letting them stand as records of inspired improvisation. Picasso, on the other hand, worked rapidly, setting down a conception, developing it only as far as necessary to capture a pictorial idea, and then hurrying on to the next image. This is not to say that his pictures are carelessly made. In the years when he worked closely with Braque, there is often a sense of urgency in Picasso's paintings, but none of the indifference so common in his late work—the look of a picture's having been abandoned because the artist knew how it would turn out. In the works of "Pioneering Cubism," Picasso is still a discoverer, the

2 The catalogue, with an essay by William Rubin, is published by the Museum of Modern Art (460 pages, $70; $35 paper).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

inventor of a new formal language that cancels out his extraordinary facility. Everything we see in these pictures seems fresh, newly hatched. Nothing has yet turned into the mannerism that haunts his last decades.

Picasso, not surprisingly, was far more prolific than Braque. There are approximately three times as many Picassos as Braques from the early years of Cubism, yet the exhibition has no sense of imbalance. Rubin is fair to each artist. Pairs of contemporaneous major works are set side by side throughout the show, forcing viewers to compare, to measure them against one another, to see for themselves the likenesses and unlikenesses between them. The rest of each gallery is divided into Picasso and Braque zones, presenting a context for the dramatically isolated "featured" works.

It's evident almost from the beginning that Braque is the *painter*, Picasso the draughtsman. Braque is always more aware of the total expanse of his picture, more aware that he is moving pigment over a surface, constructing a two-dimensional whole. Picasso is more willful, more concerned with rendering illusionistic forms (however unrealistic) in illusory space. Picasso depicts invented structures and detached planes with the same solidity that he accorded to the classical casts he drew at the School of Fine Arts in Barcelona. How dependent he is on drawing becomes clear in the remarkable series of portraits, executed in 1910, of the collector Wilhelm Uhde (Private Collection) and the art dealers Ambroise Vollard (The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow) and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (The Art Institute of Chicago). The likenesses are uncanny, despite the reduction of body forms and setting to non-specific, fluctuating planes. We would know Vollard anywhere, recognize Uhde in a crowd. Picasso's shorthand drawing gives us Vollard's pug nose, Uhde's pout, Kahnweiler's wide-set eyes. Cover the drawn faces and the paintings become virtually abstract; mentally eliminate the drawn elements of the faces and their planar structure tells you little. Even when Picasso's line serves a less descriptive function, it still defines planes sharply, making everything appear as though it could be lifted from the surface of the canvas and assembled as a three-dimensional structure.

Braque was never the natural draughtsman Picasso was, never capable of invoking complex, volumetric forms with a few effortless strokes, as Picasso could. In his drawings, Braque's line is all edge, all boundary, but in his paintings it floats free of the planes it purports to define, interrupting and warping the shallow space of the painted surface, setting up new, independent rhythms.

"Pioneering Cubism" allows us to see the young Picasso and the young Braque struggling with their new aspirations, checking their inventions against their memory of Cézanne's work and against each other's. Sometimes, when Picasso seems doubtful, he retreats a little, to a more solid, uninterrupted rendering of form. When Braque questions, he usually turns to Cézanne for guidance. Even when he is forging ahead quite independently, he seems to keep Cézanne in mind. Braque's cool palette of ochre and viridian green owes as much to Cézanne's example as it does to the local color of the landscape, just as the wrenched forms of *Musical Instruments*, 1908 (Private Collection), the picture Braque considered his first Cubist painting, are as much indebted to Cézanne's tipped, elongated compotes and pitchers as they are to new spatial and pictorial conceptions. Cézanne's ghost haunts, too, a series Braque painted in the summer of 1909; the towers of the castle of La Roche-Guyon became a centralized mass that is a direct homage to Cézanne's countless views of Mt. Ste. Victoire.

Braque concentrated on still lifes and landscapes, or rather townscapes, perhaps in imitation of Cézanne, but Picasso preferred more traditional academic subject matter: nudes, complex figure compositions, portraits. It may have something to do with his persistent conception of painting as an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

accumulation of independent images against a background—as opposed to Braque's sense of a picture as a continuous inflected expanse. Throughout 1908 and 1909, while Braque strove to turn the entire surface of his canvases into coherent, prismatic planar constructions, returning often to arrangements of buildings that he found provocative, such as the pointed roofs and turrets of La Roche-Guyon or the viaduct of L'Estaque, Picasso painted portraits and full-length nudes. He invented a new, jagged anatomy, the antithesis of the sinuous figures that populated his exquisite paintings of a few years earlier. Forms had begun to dry and harden even before his meeting with Braque, when he worked in Spain during the summer of 1906, but full expression of the impulse had to wait until 1907, in *Les Demoiselles* or the staggering *Three Women*, 1907-08 (The Hermitage Museum, Leningrad). The three monumental nudes in the latter painting, tightly intertwined, seem carved from a single block of red stone, like an angular, modern-day Laocoön. There is less air around these women than there is around *Les Demoiselles*, none of the crystalline blue atmosphere that separates the figures in the earlier picture. Instead, the three women became a single looming mass that forces everything else out of the picture. Elsewhere, Picasso slims down these massive earth mothers, turning them into agile, "tubular" nudes that at once recall the simplifications of primitive carving and the slender, jacket-clad arms of Cézanne's card players.

Even though William Rubin's declared intent is "not to argue the relative merits of these artists," it is impossible, given the opportunities for comparison afforded by "Pioneering Cubism," to resist making value judgments. But it is difficult to decide whether one painter is unquestionably better than the other. In the early years, Braque's paintings are often more harmonious, more rich and unexpected in color, more luminous, and even more satisfying as complete *pictures* than Picasso's; witness the delectable *Plate and Fruit Dish*, 1908 (Private Collection), with its sprightly pears, its detached, rhythmic curves, its surprising pink knife handle. Picasso, in the same period, achieved some truly abominable results in his attempt to force figures into Cubist structures: for example, the proletarian cartoon, *Farmer's Wife*, 1908 (The Hermitage Museum, Leningrad), or the kitschy playing card, *Queen Isabeau*, 1909 (The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow). But perhaps Picasso risks more than Braque. And when he hits, he hits hard. *Woman with a Fan*, 1908 (The Hermitage Museum, Leningrad), is a stunner. The solemn, frontal figure, eyes cast demurely down, one shoulder raised, is as implacable as any Egyptian deity. Figure and chair are flattened into essential planes, slammed against the surface of the canvas and nailed for eternity by the stiffly held fan.

Bread and Fruit Dish on a Table, 1908-09 (Kunstmuseum, Basel), is another knock-down drag-out masterpiece, a relentlessly dense, rock-like construction that may derive from Cézanne's card players. The table squats across the center of the canvas, like Gertrude Stein in Picasso's celebrated portrait. And then, suddenly, on the right-hand side, the picture begins to breathe, in the loosely drawn ghost version of the baguette, propped up to counterbalance the compote with its tight pyramid of pears. The contradiction between the picture's four-square, rather formal structure and its varied, expressive *facture* stops you dead in your tracks.

Good as Braque is, he doesn't make such stunningly forceful pictures until much later. His strength in those early years lies in paintings that sparkle and slide across the surface—the Tate Gallery's *Clarinet and Bottle of Rum*, 1911, for example, in which fragments of images float against staccato brushstrokes, momentarily coalescing into the suggestion of a still life and then drifting away again, only to be definitively fixed in place by the horizontal clarinet, threaded like a pin across the shifting planes. Braque really came into his own when he invented the *papier collé*. Cutting planes out of a single

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sheet freed him from the necessity of drawing and allowed him to compose with great economy and daring. There is graphic evidence of how well the method suited Braque: his production keeps pace with Picasso's at this point, and his nearly sixty collages are among his best and most consistent works. Picasso was quick to adopt the technique, but he used it to different ends. The pasted elements, the newspaper and trompe l'oeil patterns in Braque's *papiers collés*, are always subsumed by their new context. They become inextricable parts of a new whole. (Yes, Braque does sometimes use headlines and word fragments for private messages and jokes.) Picasso's use of collage is more self-conscious. We are meant to recognize the head or the guitar and, at the same time, to realize that it has been made by a cunning assembly of improbable elements. In Braque's work, we are primarily absorbed by the invented image and only secondarily made to think about the intelligence and intuition behind it. Picasso, like a precocious child, makes us first and foremost aware of the immense cleverness of the artist who turned that triangle of paper into a portrait.

There are marvelous moments throughout the show: the shock of seeing side-by-side pictures clearly made in response to one another, but never seen together because they come from far-flung private collections or remote museums; or the pleasure of comparing collages from many sources with a selection of the small, intimate constructions that are the main strength of the Musée Picasso, Paris. We can see color beginning to creep back into Cubist p inting, pointing toward the full-blown chromatic constructions of the late Teens. We can watch Picasso become exasperated with the self-imposed restrictions of his geometric style. We can see how the *papiers collés* turn the fragmented planes of Analytic Cubism into more defined and coherent shapes, prefiguring the advent of Synthetic Cubism, with its bold, essential silhouettes. We can even catch Picasso painting like Braque, relaxing the contours of his drawing, loosening his touch, allowing his picture to open up and breathe, and we can see Braque, in turn, making his pictures crisper, more defined, more Picasso-like, as though each artist were reacting to advice given by the other.

The cumulative effect of the exhibition, as I have said, is to make us question what we thought we knew about Cubism. I'm convinced, after several visits, that with few exceptions Cubism doesn't make for good figure painting. Even landscape is problematic, since the artist is forced to reduce an enormous chunk of actuality to the size of the canvas, just the way Renaissance painters did. Space may not be rendered according to a system of three-point perspective, but it is still a fairly traditional process of depiction. Cubist landscapes tend to forgo deep space, filling up the center with piled up buildings, aqueducts, and the like, and with very good reason. The more Cubist landscapes resemble still lifes, structurally, the better they are as a rule. But when Picasso or Braque takes as his point of departure the familiar objects of the studio or the café table, something unprecedented happens. Most of the time, the objects "rendered" are translated into images that are the same size as the originals. There's no scaling down, no depiction, simply invention of a new reality at full size. A Cubist "shattered" wineglass has as much physical presence as its actual counterpart; what we know about real wineglasses (or absinthe glasses or bottles or guitars) must be tested against the painted image, and the radical differences between them become part of the meaning of the Cubist picture.

When the tabletop is made congruent with the surface of the picture itself, then the canvas, whether rectangular or oval, becomes not a background but a tipped-up, confronting plane, and the painted still life becomes not an improvisation on something observed but an autonomous, *real* object. In Braque's hands, in a series of stunning tabletop still lifes painted in Paris in the winter of 1912-13, the familiar Cubist iconography of musical instruments,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

newspapers, wineglasses, playing cards, and the like, set on oval tables, is turned into some of the most eloquent, intelligent, and beautiful painting of the twentieth century. The clustered objects on their implied tabletops, skewed a bit against the canvas, are reduced to ambiguous gatherings of planes. The conceit of alluding to an open drawer in the front of the table simply adds to the complexity of the image. The tension between what is literally there and what is implied becomes palpable; the painting's meaning, its very presence, resides somewhere in the zone between what we associate with what was painted and what we recognize as pure invention. Like Joyce's portmanteau words, which compress a host of associations into not quite intelligible sounds, the unstable imagery of the best Cubist still lifes refers both to our everyday, observable world and to an intangible but resonant visual world. Everything comes up to the surface and then backs away, in an elegant war between fact and fiction.

Could either painter have done it alone? What we know of the later work of Picasso and Braque suggests that Rubin is quite right: the pressure each artist imposed on the other was critical to the radical inventions that we call Cubism. Braque's later work is supremely elegant, cool, dependent upon extraordinary nuances of tone, texture, and color, while Picasso's is irrepressibly inventive, capricious, personal to the point of self-indulgence. Braque, no doubt, offered Picasso helpful discipline at the same time that he may have made him more aware of the possibilities of painterly painting. Picasso, in turn, must have acted as a gadfly to Braque, goading and prodding his friend, but Picasso's nickname for Braque, "Wilbourg," from Wilbur Wright, suggests that he saw him as a pioneer and adventurer in his own right.

Some of the criticism generated by "Pioneering Cubism" has asked what relevance Cubist painting can have in 1989. The answer to this is simple. The exhibition presents us with fresh evidence that painting at its best can be passionate and cerebral, profoundly serious and witty, radically new and respectful of tradition. "Pioneering Cubism" offers vindication of the unfashionable belief in the importance and potency of art neither as social commentary, political tract, nor personal advertisement, but as something that addresses both intellect and emotion through the eyes. That's a lot. And it's relevant.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The case against Martin Bernal
by David Gress

Who would have thought it possible to enlist Bronze Age Greece in the current academic war against Western civilization? This is precisely the situation within the profession of classics, a discipline that has certainly been familiar with political polemics in the past. There is a substantial and respectable Marxist contingent of British and Italian classicists, headed by the touchy and irascible Geoffrey de Sainte Croix, who for four decades has tried to browbeat us into accepting that the class struggle is the key to understanding ancient society. Classicists impatient with the slow pace of social change in Italy felt obliged to support the cultural hegemony of the Communist party. From the 1950s to the 1970s, with the exception of the great scholar Arnaldo Momigliano, most work of grand scope in Italian classics came from Marxists like Santo Mazzarino, Francesco de Martino, and Sebastiano Timpanaro. Despite their crude metaphysics and simplistic sociology, however, these scholars were ultimately, like their non-Marxist peers, loyal to their subject. They would have been shocked and dismayed to learn that classical scholarship would eventually provide propaganda for distorting and dismantling higher education.

Just this is Martin Bernal's objective in his recent book, *Black Athena*, subtitled *The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*.[1] Bernal, professor of government at Cornell University, a former Sinologist, and, like many of his fellow academics, a supporter of the Communist side during the Vietnam War, tells his readers candidly that "the political purpose of *Black Athena* is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance." Apart from the fact that this charge has become a straw man—the chief problem in the academy today isn't European cultural arrogance but its opposite—Bernal's account, and the political circumstances in which it appears, raise some important questions about scholarship and propaganda in the academy and, *a fortiori*, in what remains of the general culture.

The provocative, even sexy title *Black Athena* promises proof that the foundation of Greek culture, its philosophy, art, literature, and historiography—all, in short, that traditional humanists have held up as archetypes and models of Western greatness—was not, after all, the work of white Europeans but of Egyptians and Levantines. In fact the book does not prove or even argue anything of the sort. Its appeal to the anti-intellectual activists on America's campuses is based on a deception. Bernal nowhere discusses Greece of the classical period; rather, he contends that Bronze Age Greece,

1 *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, by Martin Bernal; Rutgers University Press, 575 pages, $45; $15 paper. Volumes II and III, *Greece European or Levantine?* and *Solving the Riddle of the Sphinx*, are forthcoming.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the second millennium B.C. (that is, a thousand years before the age of Sophocles, Phidias, and Pericles), was heavily influenced by, and perhaps even a colony of, Egypt and/or Phoenicia. This is an interesting argument, present-day ideology apart, but it offers no logical support whatsoever for the claim that "classical civilization" has "Afroasiatic roots." What Bernal does is to announce that he is about to fire a devastating broadside at the intellectual and moral edifice of traditional classical scholarship and at the political uses to which it has supposedly been put. What follows is indeed a broadside—but one aimed at a completely different (and undefended) target. The original target remains intact, though Bernal and his admirers proclaim that it has been destroyed.

Bernal offers two reasons to support his argument that the second millennium is relevant to the achievements of the classical period a thousand years later. First, he writes that the so-called Dark Age of Greece—from 1100 to 750 B.C., between the end of the Mycenaean and the beginnings of the classical period—did not, as almost all classicists claim, mark a complete break in culture. According to Bernal, population, language, literacy, religion, and culture all survived essentially unchanged. Because there is no evidence for this view, Bernal cannot provide any. Rather, he defiantly proclaims his impatience with "positivists" who incessantly demand "proof." One of these narrow-minded scribblers is Oswyn Murray, the tutor in ancient history at Balliol College, Oxford, who in his book *Early Greece* states the consensus as follows: "Discontinuity with the past was virtually complete: later Greeks were unaware of almost all the important aspects of the world that they portrayed in heroic poetry.... The Greek world from the eighth century onwards is a product, not of Mycenae, but of the Dark Age."[2] In fact, the only conceivable reason that Bernal asserts continuity of culture through the Dark Age is that by doing so he can claim that there is a link between Afroasiatic Bronze Age Greece and a putatively Afroasiatic classical Greece. Such a link, of course, is necessary to his larger political purpose.

Bernal's second argument concerns linguistics. The vocabulary of ancient Greek is fifty percent non-Indo-European, and classical Greek grammar, he avers, shows a language "worn down" and streamlined by long use in a sophisticated culture. Bernal is right about Greek vocabulary (though his figure of fifty percent may be a bit high), but the point is not relevant. Even if there were cultural continuity from the Bronze to the classical ages, the lexicon of a language is no evidence for the cultural or ethnic composition of its speakers, as any good linguist or anthropologist knows.

Moreover, vocabulary elements and place names aside, the Greek language is one of the most obviously Indo-European features of the culture. Two brief examples: the Greek verb is an archetypally Indo-European structure in that it displays both main types of verbal system found in that language family: the aspectual, which emphasizes duration and frequency of action (as in Russian verbs) and the multi-tensual, which locates an action in time (as in Spanish verbs). Second, most linguists consider *ablaut* (a change in the root vowel to denote changes in tense, as in English strong verbs like sink/sank/sunk, or in word type, as in bear/burden) to be a basic feature of Indo-European languages; Greek displays it to a very high degree, more so than Latin. Bernal's argument that Greek grammar was worn down because it had been used on a literate level for a millennium without interruption is simply absurd. Latin lost about a third of its inflections and numerous archaic features in the space of two hundred years. There was plenty of time between the Dark Age and the era of frequent surviving inscriptions for Greek to do the same. These points may seem minor, but they are sufficient to show that Bernal simply does

2 *Early Greece* was published by Fontana in London in 1980 and was reprinted by Stanford University Press in 1983.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not make the case he claims to make and that his supporters believe he has made.

"Who were the Greeks?" has been a fundamental question for classicists for at least the last two centuries. Few have dared to provide a clear answer. Ancient Greek mythology, religious practices, political and social institutions, philosophy, language, and historiography do not tell a single, easily decipherable story about Greek ethnic or cultural origins, nor do they contain a simple civilizational code that would permit modern scholars to locate the Greeks in comparative perspective. If, for example, one studies religious beliefs and customs in isolation, one discovers evidence of Greeks who could not possibly have co-existed with those revealed by an examination of literature or political institutions. Greek civilization, it seems, was a mix of radically different, incompatible forms.

This diversity of basic elements is, of course, a major reason that Greek civilization remains the greatest and most fascinating of all high cultures. It also explains why many of the most distinguished students of comparative culture and mythology have been wary of Greek evidence. The late Georges Dumézil, for example, argued that all Indo-European-speaking peoples looked at society and the cosmos in terms of a tripartite division of both divine and human functions, such as the priest, the warrior, and the laborer who respectively served religious, political, and productive functions. Dumézil had no trouble in fitting the Romans into this scheme, but he found problematic variations in Greek culture.

Good scholarship on Greek origins requires a range of skills that few have the ability or the time to acquire. Since the early years of this century, moreover, classical studies have lost their formerly central place in Western liberal education. We find it almost inconceivable today that three years of Greek and five of Latin were standard requirements in college preparatory schools throughout the United States before 1914. As late as the 1970s, the standard grammar used in my Greek courses at the University of Copenhagen was one written by an American scholar a hundred years earlier. By contrast, few people calling themselves educated today expect to be able to sprinkle their writings with classical allusions or quotations, nor do they expect to recognize them in older works. And, I might add, the classics are but one of many threatened branches of academic learning.

In this era of galloping anti-intellectualism, virtually the only works in the classics to gain notice beyond the narrow confines of the profession are those that, by design or by accident, serve some contemporary political purpose. The main objective in the American university today is to attack and abolish core curricula on European thought and history on the grounds that they have nothing to offer the multicultural society of the future, tainted as they are with the ineradicable sins of sexism, racism, and chauvinism. (Forget for the moment the inconvenient fact that the very idea of attacking sexism, etc., is an artifact of Western culture.) In recent years, politicizing academics and their student followers have added a curious twist to this charge. Going one step further than maintaining that there are, in principle, no objectively great cultural achievements that all educated people should know about, these academics tell us that, if any such achievements do exist, they are under no circumstances the accomplishment of "Dead White European Males." Rather, all greatness is due to women, blacks, and other groups whose true prerogative has been wrongfully suppressed by these same white European males. Thus they add the charge of false indoctrination in the past to that of irrelevance in the present; together, these two charges are meant to justify the practical policy of reverse indoctrination for the future.

One minor example of the alarming consequences of this agitation was the episode last year at Stanford University in which two white students were heavily penalized and forced to exercise ritual public

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

self-criticism for blackening the picture of Ludwig van Beethoven on a poster after some black students had claimed that Beethoven was a Negro. Clearly the black students had no interest in Beethoven's place in European music and civilization, but only in the immediate political capital to be gained from annexing him to their own campaigns. A much more significant example of this agitation, however, is the shameless politicization of culture that is encouraged by the author of *Black Athena*.

If Bernal's first claim is that Bronze Age Greece was an Egyptian and Semitic colony, his second main claim, to which he devotes the first volume of *Black Athena*, is that the ancient Greeks of the classical period and, indeed, most classicists until the early nineteenth century knew of and accepted the fact of these Egyptian and Levantine roots. According to Bernal, it was only in the era of European colonialism and racism that classicists decided, for ideological reasons, that the ancient Greeks, as the forefathers of Europe, had to be Indo-European and white, and that they could not owe anything of importance in their culture to Africans or Semites. As for Egypt, he writes that "after the rise of black slavery and racism, European thinkers were concerned to keep black Africans as far as possible from European civilization." Bernal is not willing to state categorically that ancient Egypt was in fact a civilization of black Africans. Rather, he is content to imply that the Egyptians may have been partly or predominantly black, which in today's climate is more than enough to annex Egypt, like Beethoven, to the dossier of hitherto suppressed black achievement. Bernal also supports the speculative theory that classical Egyptian derives from a common East African tongue that is also the ancestor of Semitic languages (including, of course, Hebrew). Politically, this theory permits the argument that Semites, too, owe their language and culture to blacks. I can't help thinking, in regard to Egypt, that it would be salutary if those activists who want to infuse core curricula with the contributions of "persons of color," women, and non-Europeans would indeed take the trouble to study Egypt and its cultural influence. By taking Egypt seriously, these activists might learn those things about high culture that they refuse to learn from Europe, and they might also come to realize, however dimly, the immeasurable gulf that separates their own complaints and resentments from the cultural achievements of Egypt.

I should at this point declare my own interests in the matter. I work on the periphery of a university that is currently suffering severely from anti-European cultural arrogance, or, to speak frankly, from black racist attempts to impose indoctrination in the place of teaching and scholarship. I consider it harmful for Bernal to title his work *Black Athena*, since he well knows how this will be read by the audience for which he is writing, namely as an argument that Greek culture was black culture. The black activists who have seized on Bernal's book could not care less about the serious ethnographic, linguistic, and anthropological questions that Bernal's argument raises. They have no interest in learning classical Greek or in understanding the problems and issues involved in the study of Greek religion in order to discuss competently what the Greek language might owe to the Egyptian or Phoenician languages, or what elements of Greek religion might derive from Afroasiatic roots. They will use *Black Athena* the same way they used the claim that Beethoven was black: as a truncheon in their battle against the place of European thought and history in the academic curriculum. For them, and I regret to say for Bernal, Greek civilization is interesting not because it contains lessons of abiding value, but because it retains a certain, albeit etiolated, symbolic value in the public mind and therefore must be controlled by those who are now in the business of political indoctrination.

My second interest lies in the fact that I was a classics undergraduate and should therefore, if Bernal is right, have been exposed to the white European view of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ancient Greece, what he calls the "Aryan Model." At Cambridge I heard the lectures of, among others, F. H. Stubbings, D. L. Page, J. E. Raven, M. I. Finley, P. E. Easterling, and Arnaldo Momigliano. I can assure Bernal (if he has any honest doubts) that none of these scholars was in the least concerned with the Aryan or any other "model" of the Greeks. On the contrary, for all that distinguished these scholars intellectually and temperamentally, they shared a love of and commitment to texts, to the real evidence of what the ancient Greeks believed, felt, and said about themselves. As I mentioned, Bernal states that he has no patience with "positivists" and their irritating habit of demanding "proof" of assertions. No doubt studying the records and painstakingly deciding what these records might or might not mean, and what conclusions one can legitimately draw from them, is infinitely less exciting than denouncing all those who perform such work as racists and ideologues. What is ironic, given the contrast in method, is that every one of the scholars I have mentioned was capable of broad, synthetic, and often provocative interpretations. The difference between them and Bernal is that they told you something new about the ancient world, whereas Bernal merely modernizes old anti-Western commonplaces.

What, precisely, is Bernal's ideology? Behind his fashionable anti-Western façade lurks a very traditional Marxism. After all, Bernal dedicates his work to his father, the well-known scientist and Communist fellow traveller John Desmond Bernal, "who taught me that things fit together, interestingly." They certainly do. I must say that in my own moral scale Bernal senior ranks very low indeed, somewhere between Pol Pot and Jean-Paul Sartre. J. D. Bernal was one of those who voluntarily surrendered his intellect and scholarly integrity to the cause of the greatest mass murderer in the history of mankind: that of Joseph Stalin. Bernal junior, ever the loyal red diaper baby, glories in this affiliation. He must, therefore, expect to have his work judged in the political context within which he operates. For Bernal senior, the context was Stalin's attempt to subjugate Europe and exterminate all those he defined as his enemies. For Bernal junior, it is the post-1968 context of Third World liberationism and Marxist anti-imperialism. Speaking of the modern Middle East, for example, Bernal puts the word *terrorists* in sneer quotes and says that the Western image of the violent Arab or Iranian is the product of pure racism. Elsewhere, he refers naïvely to "the American repression" in Vietnam, as though it were a fact that needs no evidence. Not a word, of course, about the real repression and mass murder committed by Bernal's Communist heroes after their victory in 1975.

This first volume of *Black Athena*, then, is not about ancient Greece at all, whether classical or Bronze Age. Entitled *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, it is an indictment of the past two centuries of classical scholarship for allegedly rejecting the "Ancient Model" of Greek culture, which stated that its roots were Egyptian and Eastern, and for imposing instead a racist "Aryan Model," stating that the Greeks were entirely European and owed nothing to Africa or Asia.

The history of scholarship, including its politics, can be a fascinating subject if honestly presented. Bernal's account is not honest. It suffers from a virulent case of the disease that afflicts all Marxist writing, a disease that manifests itself as an attitude of fundamental suspicion according to which no one (except the author) can do or understand anything correctly at all; rather, everyone (except the author) is blinkered, willfully or negligently stupid, prejudiced, and racist. The author and those with whom he agrees, on the other hand, are uniquely privileged to be free of all material and intellectual interests; living in the realm of pure objective insight, they alone have the tools to unmask the stupidity and nefarious plans of their political enemies.

Thanks to this disease, Bernal acknowledges no need to be fair, comprehensive, or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

accurate in his account of the history of classical scholarship. For example, *Black Athena* includes a section entitled "Developments in Classics, 1945-65." This twenty-year span comprises a tenth of the entire period he covers in his volume, one that is full of important and exciting developments, not least in the field of Mycenaean and early Greek history. Does Bernal devote a tenth of his text to this period, examining the work, say, of Oswyn Murray on society, Walter Burkert on religion, John Boardman and James Cook on Greek overseas trade and colonization, Kenneth Dover on literature—to name but a few? Of course not. He offers three pages on Michael Ventris's decipherment of Linear B, a system of writing and record-keeping used in Mycenaean Greece. In 1952 Ventris proved that the language of Linear B was an early form of Greek. According to Bernal, while many classicists immediately recognized the proof as a major discovery, they were dismayed by evidence that the Mycenaeans used Greek, because Mycenaean culture was derived from that of Minoan Crete which was in turn influenced by Egypt and Asia. If there was continuity of Greek language from Mycenaean to classical times, Bernal argues, then there was also continuity of Afroasiatic influence.

The truth is that the classicists had no problem whatsoever with Linear B, nor with Egyptian influence on Mycenae. What they could not and cannot accept, however, is continuity of Afroasiatic influences across the Dark Age—not because they are racists, but because all the evidence is against it. Bernal believes that he has a political, ideological, and moral obligation to assert such influence, but this does not make it real. What the classicist Peter Kidson wrote remains true: "When the Greeks emerged from the shadows of their Dark Age, they had shed almost all the political and religious institutions that might have linked them with Egypt."[3]

3 In his essay "The Figural Arts" in *The Legacy of Greece*, edited by M.I. Finley; The Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1981.

Elsewhere in his attack on postwar scholarship, Bernal states his belief that the "Aryan Model" is losing support and that classicists will soon have to admit that a black and African Egypt did indeed contribute essential features to Greek culture. Bernal offers no evidence for these contributions, preferring to stay on the safe ground of the second millennium, where lack of evidence permits the most egregious assertions. But let us for a moment take his point seriously. If Bernal is right, we would expect to find Egyptian influence not just on the peripheries of Greek vocabulary or religious practices but on the central elements themselves, on what was most unique in classical culture. Do the institutions of classical civilization resemble those of Egypt or the ancient Near East?

Perhaps the two most characteristic and lasting achievements of classical civilization are political democracy and the writing of history. In the political sphere, the Athenians invented the strict concept of absolute equality (*isonomia*) among citizens, discovered the virtues of unrestrained free speech (*parrhesia*) and of innovation in politics, and believed that genuine democracy required that the chief offices of the state be distributed by lot and not by election according to merit. These beliefs were unique in history. No other people believed in and upheld for so long the Periclean notion that the survival of the state depended not on mere physical force but on the participation in government of its citizens, since only the freedoms guaranteed by such participation provided the reason and the motivation required to preserve the city.

Egypt was a noble culture, but to assert that it had anything at all to do with Greek democracy is ludicrous. The Greeks believed passionately in free human will—even, or especially, when that will conflicted with that of the gods. Politically, they rejected hierocracy and priestly rule before recorded history begins. Egypt, by contrast, was a theocracy in the most literal sense throughout its long history: the king was god, and by his divinity upheld the land and all its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

inhabitants. "Pharaoh was not mortal but a god," according to Henri Frankfort, who goes on to write about the Egyptian view of change: "The ancient Near East considered kingship the very basis of civilization. Only savages could live without a king. Security, peace, and justice could not prevail without a ruler to champion them .... Egypt viewed the world as essentially static. It held that a cosmic order was once and for all established at the time of creation .... Nature itself could not be conceived without the king."[4] The Greek, always asking "what's new in the city?" ("ti neon ep' astu;"), seems like an alien creature by contrast. And alien of course he was: alien to the traditional course of human history. In this regard, the Egyptians were far more typical. An Egyptian minister of around 1000 B.C. said: "What is the king of Upper and Lower Egypt? He is a god by whose dealings one lives, the father and mother of all men, alone by himself, without an equal." A more un-Greek thought would be hard to imagine.

Regarding history, the Greeks' crucial discovery—one that permitted them to invent the writing of history as the account of the interaction of human affairs over time—was the discovery of time as the destroyer of all things "except the gods," as Herodotus put it. Because things of this world come to be and pass away, each according to its nature, the only possible account of the events of this world is one that examines each entity—person, nation, or empire—in its individuality. The purpose of Greek history was to give an account of individuality, whereas that of Near Eastern and Egyptian chronicles was to reduce all events to the uniform and ceremonial pattern of the cosmic order. Bernal makes much of the arguments of a German Egyptologist, Siegfried Morenz, who allegedly supports the notion of the Egyptian influence on Greece. But unfortunately for Bernal, Morenz in fact emphasizes how different Egyptian ideas were from those of the Greeks. As he notes, "History in Egyptian might be translated as *irw*, that which must be done again and again, because historical action occurs according to norms that bind the actor to ceremonial repetition."[5] In traditional cultures like Egypt, reality and ritual, legend and history coincided. The king became real by incessantly repeating the archetypal actions that founded the world. It is very possible that Mycenaean kings thought and acted the same way; classical Greeks emphatically did not. They discovered a new way to examine the political and social world and to orient themselves in it. Some scholars argue, convincingly in my view, that this new approach had a political cause, namely the Persian Wars in which Greece came close to extinction. But this point is no help to Bernal, because Egypt, too, underwent crises without developing either democracy or historiography. The Greeks developed both because they wanted to master the world rather than be mastered by it. It was a noble effort, beyond the understanding of those who want to prevent today's students from learning about it—an effort that often failed, but one that continues to provide the inspiration for us to struggle against the barbarians.

Black Athena is pernicious because it serves a political purpose hostile to the culture of scholarship. (Its very title is deceptive, because the author offers no evidence that the goddess Athena was considered to be black. He says, rather, that her great-aunt may have married an African or a Phoenician, which no one doubts.) The interesting arguments that one might have with Bernal on Bronze Age settlement, the introduction of the alphabet, Egyptian or Semitic elements in the lexicon of classical Greek, or even on the history of classics are unfortunately vitiated from the start by his resentful and truculent

4 *Kingship and the Gods*, by Henri Frankfort; University of Chicago Press, 1948.

5 Quoted in Christian Meier, *Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen* ("The Origins of the Political Among the Greeks"); Suhrkamp (Frankfurt), 1980.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tone. Placing himself "in the spectrum of black scholarship" rather than "within the academic orthodoxy," he assumes throughout the book that many professional scholars who see no evidence of strong Egyptian influence on classical civilization suffer from "passionate and systematic racism." This is to misrepresent grossly the ethos and requirements of scholarship. Specialists on early Greece face specific problems that cannot be wished away. Evidence for important areas of ancient Greek life simply does not exist. These scholars have, therefore, developed a technically complex, consistent, and highly productive set of methods for testing evidence and proposing hypotheses where evidence is lacking. It happens that these methods yield results that Bernal, for political reasons, does not like. His reaction is to denounce this scholarship as politically tainted in order to justify his own anti-scholarship. Bernal's denunciations, delivered with a uniformly spiteful tone, give his work the same moral and scholarly status as the Aryan science of the Third Reich or the Lysenkoite genetics of Stalinist Russia; that is, none whatever.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poems *by Sandra McPherson, Brian Culhane & Paul Lake*

Appliqué tulip quilt from Kansas

Label pinned to quilt: "This bright cheerful spring quilt was made in the Thirties by a black woman."

Francis Ponge: "The present is like the first time we remember."

Even great movements of the clouds
  acknowledge that spot
    by the back door,
  a little garden plot
with drawing power.
                There, spring falls
upwards from the mint-green
  depths of the Depression—
    tulips, thirty-one,
  red, fawn-nectarine,

  rimmed by a guardrail
    as pink as medicine
in spoons. The tulips slide,
  slip, big gown heads
    strain to balance,
however deft at showing off.
  Their leaves rush,
    rock the silence,
  cat stalking a dove
(fur rubbing, wing-escape

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

creaking).
Then a top strip throws
the planted rows
all off, misaligning, unregimenting.
She had a need to excite
tulips' need to paw.
As conservator, I crawl,
hand-lens, tweezers, yellow
border urging all the while:
"Gather her filaments

too from the dark
side of our quilt, the day-
lily, squash-blossom side
(that dark a gleam)."
And I do: her silver-blue
and black hairs, eras,
equally in it,
having curled up into
this flowering cure
for winter

and held,
loosely, supplely,
like a hand-stitched seam.
They will be held in reserve,
unrusted
cultivator tools,
while strange heirs, whoever cares,
crawl on, sleep under,
bulbs doubling in this underground.
Though waking is inevitable,

is it into her absence
or her present? Century's end—
still in this earth of Holland,
Turkey, Dahomey, Kansas,
the longing is born
to be appledoorn, red emperor,
to grow as she conceived
her park, her curtilage,
to flourish:
weedless.

—*Sandra McPherson*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Willia Ette Graham's Infinity Log Cabin Quilt, Oakland, 1987

". . . all symmetries are based on the assumption that it is impossible to observe certain basic quantities, which we shall call 'nonobservables.' Conversely, whenever a nonobservable becomes an observable, we have a symmetry violation."

—T. D. Lee, physicist

"That's normal."

—Reverend Robert Small

Probably
she set out
to make a rainbow
one can't

get out
from under,
its edges
layered on raw,

bulges overlapped
to nap
down smooth.
Here and there

she stored
spare
triangles,
beside a flower path

or in
an abandoned yellow ray.
Ripples
in her universe

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have angles,
and the center
is a long
way down.

A ring
around a quilt
is a square.
And the questionable

bands
the inspirational—
there is always
something

further out,
its own zone
and home.
Blue heavens

resolve
into cheap
chartreuse.
An earth-

patch starts
a day, seams it
to night.
But suddenly

her stripes
reverse
the field,
breach

the mirror.
She finds
the remnant shop
of nonobservables.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The most terrible
lane of cloth
she faces—
it is travesty

to posit any
finer fabric
in its place.
And so

the aureate
and anti-aureate
sashes pulse
from the

cornered center
as if
from the splash
of a log cabin.

Infinity
does not
exaggerate:
it is a large object

readable
across a lake,
then foldable, carryable
under an arm.

When one
opens it
again, everything
pending appears.

—*Sandra McPherson*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Paradigm

Cool pressure of prescience, this snow
Against the familiar, gritty pavements
Of New York. A piano plays rapidly
And in ignorance; accumulations
Deepening throughout the night.
What we have lived has lived us.
No nighttime music lusters the street:
Only scales, left hand, right,
As steady as this snow, ascent
And descent, the way lovers talk
To themselves at night, higher, lower,
Always searching for the opposing touch,
The steady snow, these lucent attitudes.
Crystallizations at some further remove.

—*Brian Culhane*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Simon says

We're playing Simon Says. Remember how?
(Simon says remember how, so it's okay.)
It's not enough to do what Simon says,
It's what he says he says that you obey.
The rules are Simon's. All right, let's begin.
Simon says, Don't read this sentence or you're out.
You did? That's it, game's over, Simon wins,
However much you plead, protest, or pout.
Bound by the iron chain of such curved sense,
Simon himself must discontinue play.
There's no appeal to gray omnipotence.
What Simon says he says he can't unsay.

—*Paul Lake*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

Diasporisms

by Jed Perl

Pick up a copy of painter R. B. Kitaj's *First Diasporist Manifesto* if you want to have some sense of the kind of oddball heterodoxy that an artist may feel compelled to invent for himself right now.[1] This is a confusing and challenging time, a time when all the general ideas that were derived from the specificity of Cubism appear to have failed. I say right now, but Kitaj's book is not, to his credit, an I-was-born-yesterday confession. Kitaj, who's fifty-seven, has been at it for decades: painting, exhibiting, and from time to time proselytizing on behalf of his friends, a crowd of more or less representational painters who are more or less based in London. His book is a bit of a postmodern event, but it's also a modern event, proof that even as everything changes there aren't all that many possible kinds of thoughts to have anyway, and in the end is the beginning, and vice versa.

This "affectionate shot across the bows of so much received aesthetic opinion" (Kitaj's words) is short and messy, a combination of miniaturized-personal and overscaled-general that holds, loses, and grabs back a reader from page to page. "Painting," Kitaj begins, "is not my life. My life is my life. Painting is a great idea I carry from place to place. It is an idea full of ideas, like a refugee's suitcase, a portable Ark of the Covenant. Before I run for my train, spilling a few of these painting ideas, I just want to stand still on the platform and announce some of my credentials (more later): I am a dislocated pretender." It's hard to know if the combination of pride and modesty is authentic or put-on; perhaps Kitaj himself isn't always sure. Kitaj finds his guiding metaphors of fearful alienation and miraculous self-renewal in the diasporist history of the Jews, who have been without a homeland for thousands of years and who mostly still live outside their post-World War II homeland. Kitaj is treating a great subject in an idiosyncratic way. He describes a double diaspora: he is both a wandering artist and a Jewish expatriate. The book whizzes along for one hundred and twenty-eight pages (half of which are illustrations), and I find myself beguiled by his rambunctious Jewishness, as well as by his general feeling that the art of painting "may very well resist harmony and pattern," may resist the "human impulse to resolve ambiguity."

Kitaj is an exhibitionistically quirky writer, brilliant and blustery. And, like his paintings, which are quite specific about people and certain images and then spin off into inchoate expressionistic brushwork, his book hops from topic to topic and in the process skates over some of the places where one wants elaboration. He never makes much of a stab at explaining how all his complicatedly interconnected thoughts can be transferred to paint-on-canvas. The romantic in me gets seduced while the classicist

1 *First Diasporist Manifesto*, by R. B. Kitaj; Thames and Hudson, 128 pages, $12.95 paper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in me balks; but the *First Diasporist Manifesto* is a true manifesto ("albeit not a very aggressive one," Kitaj observes) in that the artist mediates exactly as he pleases between his private obsessions and the wide world where everything unfolds to our helpless and sometimes appalled astonishment. "I want it to be somewhat declarative," Kitaj says of his *Manifesto*, "because I think art and life are fairly married and I think I owe it to my pictures to put their stressful birth with some idiosyncratic precision."

This may be an age of artist celebrities, but artists have actually been rather quiet, letting others speak for them, or else speaking in borrowed language—other peoples' jargon. Kitaj's book is sui generis: a rambling talk that has some of the casual style of real-life conversation and that, like a lively talk with friends about art, combines big thoughts and naughty jokes, such as Kitaj's teasing reference to "the outer spatial Frank Stella." I prefer Kitaj's self-proclaimed outsider stance to Stella's egotism, which is that of a sort of latter-day Sir Joshua Reynolds laying down the pictorial law. Nevertheless, Kitaj, a celebrity "who feels out of place much of the time," doesn't entirely convince us (at least me) when he describes his feelings of alienation. The writing is so jaunty, so ebullient. "I'm sorry and excited to be so difficult and unpopular" is maybe a little over the top coming from one who shows regularly at the Marlborough Gallery in New York and London. And what's the point of a salvo such as "I'm just a poor struggling painter"? But then again Kitaj says, "Much of my life I've been a good bad boy." This, I suspect, is right on the mark. "I've pursued the Spirit of Romance as good bad boys do in Art and Life. I chased it all over Europe, across America, into and out of trouble and assimilations of many kinds." This I believe.

I also believe the self-portrait of the secular Jew who "as a young man . . . was not sure what a Jew was," and was brought up as "a freethinker with no Jewish education." We all know people who started out that way and ended up trying in one way or another to deal with Judaism and Jewishness (two very different things). Kitaj's relationship to these parts of himself strikes me as honest, and achieved through a process of self-examination that cannot always have been painless. Kitaj is what he refers to in the catalogue of his 1985-86 show at Marlborough as "an *interested* Jew of some kind." In the *Manifesto* he gives, in passing, a measured liberal view of Arab-Israeli relations. And I'm relieved that he does not romanticize religious orthodoxy, which liberals are wont to do. Too many liberals look at the folkways of the Hasidim (the most visible of the Orthodox) through those tolerant-liberal binoculars, and sigh sympathetically, as if that were the real thing, irreproachable and, of course, rigid as anything and practically impossible. Kitaj is easing himself into a world he was born of but not into, and no one can ask of himself anything more.

The *First Diasporist Manifesto* is about Jewishness and modernism, about a people "dispersed, hurt, hounded, uneasy, their pariah condition confound[ing] expectation in profound and complex ways." It's not new to observe that there are tangled connections between Jewishness and the culture of modernism; and Kitaj makes no bones of his debts to writers who have brought a Jewish past into the secular present, among them Walter Benjamin and Isaiah Berlin. He quotes from Clement Greenberg's essay on "Kafka's Jewishness," the essay with which, not insignificantly, Greenberg chose to conclude his 1961 book *Art and Culture*. (Greenberg was saying "Judaism still matters.") Greenberg's theory about Kafka is that the constricted and terrifying lives of his heroes, which permit neither memory nor hope, reflect the condition of late nineteenth-century emancipated Jews, who rejected Halacha—the system of religious law that ordered a traditional Jewish life—but found little solace in the larger Gentile world. Writing in the Fifties, Greenberg insisted on the relevance of Kafka's situation for contemporary Jews; and Kitaj doesn't find the situation entirely changed today. When Kitaj says that "the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Diasporist lives and paints in two or more societies at once," he echoes Greenberg's observation that "nothing in Kafka is located according to any of the objective coordinates of time, place, history, geography or even mythology or religion."

What separates Greenberg's and Kitaj's views of Diasporism isn't really a matter of facts so much as a matter of what one extrapolates from the facts. (Thus does modern become postmodern.) For Greenberg, "the emancipated Jew exchanges one kind of confinement for another, and perhaps the new kind induces even more claustrophobia than the old did." For Kitaj, despite the Holocaust, the situation of being halfway between the old world and the new provides exhilarating opportunities. His sense of living in a peripheral world yields paintings that "betray confounded patterns." The very lack of clarity is presented as exciting. "As in Cubism," Kitaj explains, "the Diasporist painting I have always done also often represents more than one view. But I am mostly drawn to variably modulated pictures of the mind at work, instinctive *paint-dramas* of incertitude, views wrapped around imagined themes and variations, the contradictions of Diasporic life, apotheoses of groundlessness."

At one point, Kitaj appropriates Picasso's *Guernica* for Diasporist painting. The shattered classicism of Picasso's war work offers a sort of heterogeneity that's to Kitaj's taste. For Kitaj, there are analogies among a variety of modern disasters, dislocations, exiles. The Diasporist extrapolates from his own experience to a general historical condition. Diasporist painting, it becomes evident, is a public kind of painting, a little like Allen Ginsberg's public poetry, maybe, with its wildman vigor. The cast of characters in Kitaj's work is very large, including all the types one might encounter in a Europe-in-exile George Grosz café. Kitaj counts among his subjects the "Orientalist, Neocubist, Arabist, Remembrist, Cézannist, Sensualist, Communist and Socialist, Kabbalist, Caféist, Hispanist, and so on." He means to tell their stories, which are also, since he sees these types as aspects of himself, his own story. There is considerable risk involved in trying to transform a personal myth into a public myth and then into a work of art. In Kitaj's case the results often strike me as paintings that are running after life rather than coming out of life. I guess Kitaj would put me with "one of the most recent of my hundred negative critics [who] wrote in his review of my 1986 exhibition that it was 'littered with ideas.' Heavens to Betsy, I hope that's true." The disagreement may come down to my being a classicist, though sometimes a crazed one.

Greenberg ends his Kafka essay grimly and, I think, a bit self-importantly, saying, "But might not all art, 'prosaic' as well as 'poetic,' begin to appear falsifying to the Jew who looked closely enough? And when did a Jew ever come to terms with art without falsifying himself somehow?" Jews do have an uneasy relationship to the visual arts. Brought up in a culture that puts restrictions on the use of the arts, Jews—including those with the most casual connection to a few major holidays—may have a tendency to see the masterpieces of Western art as a forbidden kingdom. But the Jewish disposition toward the life of ideas has ultimately given the idea of art an irresistible appeal. Even if a Jew has to choose art, I think Greenberg—and Kitaj—are a bit much on this seeing-oneself-in-history routine. A generation after "Kafka's Jewishness," Kitaj is making a self-conscious return to the ambivalence of assimilation. One possible response to his *Manifesto* is: Why all the fuss? Don't goyim struggle toward art, too?

Kitaj will strike a sympathetic cord in many readers who are puzzled by the precise nature of Diasporist painting with his observation that "Diasporist painting is the other side of the coin of Intimist painting." To the diaspora of the international wanderer he opposes Bonnard, and who among us, Jew and non-Jew, hasn't looked at Bonnard's Côte d'Azur world covetously, wanting for ourselves that ease, that lyricism? Kitaj writes: "I always keep a picture, tacked to my wall, of the gorgeous

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

little painting of the Almond Tree which Bonnard was working at on his last day, to remind me of another fate, a more sublime and fixed one than that of Jews or my own peculiar Diasporism, where painting marks on canvas may spell peripatetic danger instead of peace in the sun." That Bonnard painting is certainly a brilliant image to invoke if one wants to suggest that we are now alienated from some harmonious ideal of what painting was. That almond tree is a great nature painter's last farewell to the nature-painting tradition of his people—the French, who defined the terms and did it better than anyone else.

But I'm not so sure that what separates Kitaj from Bonnard is the politics of Diasporism versus the politics of Intimism so much as it is something else: formal incompleteness versus formal completeness. What attracts us in Bonnard—again, Jews and non-Jews alike—is the seamlessness of his expression. But there's nothing natural about that seamlessness. Bonnard himself had to win through to his almond tree. And how he had to win through! There are more bad Bonnards than there are great Bonnards. I worry about a Woody Allen side of Kitaj's argument: the tendency to romanticize the intimacy of non-Jews, to see their composure and sense of form as god-given (by *their* god). Bonnard knew from wars, schlock, distractions. When Kitaj speaks of "host-art"—the art of the culture in which the Diasporist lives—he sounds funny-paranoid, Woody Allen-esque. Of course Bonnard believed in "host-art," but it wasn't handed to him: he re-invented it.

So: where do we go from here? That's the question a manifesto asks. (In the early twentieth-century manifestos the answer tended to zoom off into religio-social mysticism, but Kitaj is too liberal and pragmatic a romantic for that.) It is possible to continue in Bonnard's way (a possibility that Kitaj isn't denying). But I think that Kitaj's large point—and he uses Diasporism and Jewishness as metaphors—is that artists are buffeted from all sides and want to put the variety of their experience into their art. In the catalogue of his latest Marlborough show, Kitaj observes that "paintings are supposed to be self-contained things. Well, as almost everyone knows, they are and they're not." The *First Diasporist Manifesto* is a plea for breakup and complication, for more rather than less. I suppose we're all (with the exception of a couple of antediluvian formalists) for that. But one of the lessons that we learn from the masterpieces in the museums is that the people who painted them were always willing to simplify—even if it meant throwing a lot of things away. (How much does Titian tell us about his life and times?)

Of course, the sort of false simplification that has dominated painting since World War II is another matter entirely, a matter that has brought us, in justified reaction, to the sort of taste reflected in the *First Diasporist Manifesto*. But if the internal logic of painting seems shot to hell, artists are only going to have to labor all the harder to recover it. I think of the chorus of a pop song that goes something like, "Break up and make up, that's all we can do." Still, many, including the best and brightest, bristle. It's no fun being left to pick up the pieces. There's a very revealing line toward the end of Kitaj's *Manifesto*, where the artist confesses, "I find myself in uneasy alliance with the natural pleasures of painting, which become conventional even as I do wish to pursue them." That's the comment of someone who really is a painter. All the painters I know worry about not giving themselves over enough to "the natural pleasures," and then again about getting sunk by those pleasures. But is the answer to be willfully unconventional? What is for certain is that no system gives certainty, and perhaps Diasporism is after all too much of a system. May the best breaker-maker win.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music

At Merkin Hall

by Dana Mack

In the little more than ten years of its existence, Merkin Concert Hall has become an important part of New York City's musical life. Its location near Lincoln Center, its functional and inviting interior, its sympathetic acoustics, and its small scale, which is limited to an audience capacity of 457—all of these attributes make Merkin Hall a desirable venue for solo and chamber-music performances. In addition, those responsible for the hall have presented it to the musical public with a certain high-mindedness. Their practice, for example, of charging a substantially higher rental fee than the competing Weill Recital Hall (located in the Carnegie Hall building), while not excluding the unknown, acts to discourage unqualified performers. Merkin sponsors its own series, moreover, which run the gamut from music played on old instruments (or copies thereof) to contemporary works written for small and medium-sized ensembles. Finally, there is the attachment of the hall to the Hebrew Arts School complex in the Abraham Goodman House, an educational institution offering programs in music to New York's substantial Jewish community.

If around the corner at Lincoln Center culture is dispensed to great numbers in an atmosphere of glitz and glee, Merkin's atmosphere is one of quiet dignity and earnestness. It is hardly surprising that the Beethoven Society schedules its very traditional concerts here, or that well-known artists bring their more demanding repertoire to the Merkin stage. As a result, one has come to expect something more than the usual staples of the recital and chamber repertory—works that are welcome supplements to a flagging New York concert life.

One has learned to assume, then, that the goals of Merkin's sponsors, and of the musicians who use its facilities, are high indeed. When Merkin's September calendar of events arrived, one naturally wanted to sample its offerings, which included a generous amount of new American music under the auspices of three different concert series, as well as a two-concert series on the Polish art song. But concert-giving, it goes without saying, involves more than aspiration, even for the high-minded. Unfortunately, these musical events often proved to be very disappointing.

The opening concert of the season, on September 7, was full of bad omens. Sponsored by the two-year-old New York Festival of Song, it featured two works: Brahms's *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, written for four voices, accompanied by two pianists, and the American premiere of Leonard Bernstein's 1988 *Arias and Barcarolles*, written for four hands, soprano, and baritone. (There is also an orchestral version of this piece which was performed shortly thereafter at the 92nd Street Y in New York.) Michael Barrett, co-pianist and co-producer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the series, seemed an appropriate choice to introduce this work. He has enjoyed Bernstein's favor in recent years, collaborating with him in the Vienna Staatsoper premiere of *A Quiet Place* as well as in concerts at Lincoln Center.

While Bernstein's favorable musical opinion of Mr. Barrett may thus be assumed, it is doubtful that Brahms would have shared it if he could have heard Mr. Barrett's interpretation of the *Liebeslieder Waltzes*. Described in the program notes by Mr. Barrett and his co-producer Steven Blier as a "rewarding piece of *Hausmusic* [*sic*] . . . [which] has a joyous sense of community," the *Waltzes* were marred on this occasion by exaggerated phrasing, fitful stops and starts, and ponderously slow *tempi*. Only two of the work's eighteen waltzes—*Nein, es ist nicht auszukommen* ("There is no bearing") and *Es bebet das Gestraeuche* ("The bushes tremble")—achieved the *Schwung*, a word usually though inadequately translated as "swing," so central to Brahms performance. The rest of the waltzes created the overriding impression of a valiant, belabored effort to convey strange music sung in a strange tongue. At the piano, Barrett and Blier swayed conspicuously, and the singers—Carmen Pelton, soprano; Lucille Beer, mezzo; Carl Halverson, tenor; William Sharp, baritone—all (with the exception of Halverson) hooted an incomprehensible German. The result was an interpretation far from the requisite delicacy of expression—not to mention intimacy—appropriate to a Viennese musical evening at home.

Still, the beauty of Brahms's music made the effort worthwhile. It is not clear that the effort was justified in the case of Bernstein's new work. Here the performance ultimately begged the question as to whether the music was worthy of the talent placed at its disposal. It is sad to have to say that Bernstein's ever-increasing coarseness is becoming as legendary as his gifts as a music performer. (In a rehearsal with an international youth orchestra televised in Germany last year, he referred to a moment in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* as the "third vomit.") In his *Arias and Barcarolles* he claims as inspiration no less celebrated a source than President Eisenhower. According to the program notes, Eisenhower commented to the conductor after a White House concert (of unspecified music) that he "liked that last piece . . . . It's got a theme. I like music with a theme, not all them arias and barcarolles."

The inanity of this offhand remark is quite well matched, alas, by Bernstein's dismal music. This new song cycle, the subject of which is the alleged emptiness of the marital state, is a composition of astounding thinness and banality. The embarrassing lyrics, mostly by Bernstein, are pure Broadway kitsch. At one point (I quote from memory) they go something like:

> What shall we name the baby?
> Why are the nations raging?
> Who's gonna win the election?
> Why am I aging?

Bernstein's music, moreover, is shamelessly derivative, revealing that his composition model, at least for the new songs "Love Duet," "The Love of My Life," and "Mr. and Mrs. Webb Say Goodnight," is the redoubtable Hollywood/Broadway tunesmith Marvin Hamlisch. Bernstein's curious insertion into the cycle of his own 1955 "Greeting," with its obvious Gershwin influence, only serves to remind us that his forays into popular modes once resulted in music of more depth.

There was one promising moment: the composer's setting of a Yiddish poem by Yankov Yitzhak Segal, entitled "Oif Mayn Chasneh" ("At My Wedding"). The subject of the song is a young fiddler's gift for touching the hearts of a wedding party. Built on a falling chromatic motive, this song displays a musical intensity and earnestness completely lacking in the rest of the cycle. Bernstein's selection of the text and his successful setting of it within this context may be a sign that occasionally he still takes music, if not marriage, seriously. Unfortunately, William Sharp's performance was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

marred by a distressing tendency to ham up this attractive song. But it may be that an exaggerated performance of this sort is precisely what Bernstein was after.

Hardly more inspiring than the Brahms/Bernstein evening were the contemporary selections on Merkin's September 20 program, one of four in the trendily titled series "Voices of Change: American Music of Protest Politics and Persuasion." This series is proving to be an exception to Merkin's general high-mindedness. Though it acknowledges financial support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the series is turning out to be little more than an exercise in the sociological documentation of popular culture.

And how could it be otherwise? American artists, especially composers of highbrow music, have not historically been known for the political commitment that marks so much European music. This particular evening, however, promised such highbrow commitment. According to the Merkin Hall subscription brochure, one could hear no less than "recent ruminations on workers' movements in music by Fredric Rzewski" (a former student of Walter Piston and Milton Babbitt) and Christian Wolff's 1975 "magnum opus, *Wobbly Music*" (a reference to the early name for members of the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers of the World).

If the title of the program, "Workers of the World," appeared earnest, even insurrectionist, the first half of its offerings was mild enough. Acting out a 1930s union meeting, soprano Marni Dixon—best known for supplying the singing voice of Audrey Hepburn in the film version of *My Fair Lady*—and the American Music/Theater Group offered a review of old labor tunes. Among them were Jay Gourney's "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," Harold Rome's "Sing Me a Song of Social Significance," and some rousers from the *Workers' Songbooks*, collections of songs

MATISSE

Drawings from
1915-1951

closing December 16

Helen Serger
la boetie, inc.

9 East 82nd Street
New York 10028
Tel. (212) 535-4865

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

written for the trade union movement. The most memorable of the latter were Charles Seeger's "Song of the Builders" and Aaron Copland's "Into the Streets May First." The hit of the evening was quite definitely a spirited rendition of Harold Rome's "Doing the Reactionary." The audience, composed largely of old union organizers and students, could scarcely contain its enthusiasm.

What a shock, then, when the well-known and respected contemporary-music pianist Ursula Oppens appeared after intermission to play Rzewski's *North American Ballads* (1979). This work, with its pretensions to moral earnestness, is music of another kind entirely. The more original of its two rhapsodic movements consists of dissonant variations on the "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues." One could say that the cotton mill got rolling during the performance, but the results were otherwise unimpressive. As an introduction to this second movement, Oppens supplied a distressing, off-pitch vocal rendition of the blues theme—hardly fit to make the theme recognizable within the harmonic and textural complexities of the score that followed. Oppens preferred in any case to ignore these complexities, concentrating her formidable energy exclusively on keeping time. In fact, her pedestrian interpretation was marked by an audible tapping of the piano's pedal on every beat.

Most bizarre, however, was the reputed "magnum opus" of the evening. Christian Wolff's hymn in tribute to the IWW's 1912 strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, is so rigid, so boring, and so simple-minded that it constitutes an ironic commentary on the bloody doctrines of the working-class movement to which it is dedicated. Wolff's work reaches the apogee of dullness in a chanted setting of the Preamble to the IWW Constitution. Here, in the stodgiest raising of dead causes imaginable, the aimlessness of the evening was capped.

The pervasive influence of American popular culture was also evident in the new works performed by the New York University Contemporary Chamber Ensemble on September 27. The title of this program was "Echoes of Eastern Europe . . . Echoes of Jazz," but it must be said that the echoes from Eastern Europe seemed pretty weak.

Aside from the presence of such folk instruments as Yugoslavian ethnic flutes and the Hungarian tarogato, Eastern European influence was represented solely by Dino Constantinides's *Patterns for Violin and Piano.* This dreary Brahmsian exercise served only to remind us that the academy, true to its name, still produces academic music. Most of the numbers, with names like *Trigrams, Ear Shelling,* and *Going: 2 in 7,* sounded like avant-garde "jam" sessions to which an electronic tape had been added.

Since most of the evening's pieces were products of the NYU faculty, it is hardly surprising that the makeup of the performing ensemble reflected the resources at hand. This cutting of the musical suit to fit the available personnel doubtless accounted for the almost ubiquitous presence of Esther Lamneck's clarinet and the ominous frequency of Rob Tomaro's electric guitar. The electric guitar, even less acoustically welcome in the close confines of Merkin Hall than the electronic tape that was also used, turned out to be the great horror of the evening. Its effect by itself would be nauseating in such small quarters; when combined with ethnic flutes, prepared piano, and clarinet in Tomaro's *The Four Worlds: Physical World, Subtle World, Mental World, Real World,* it was simply too much to bear.

It should be mentioned that much of the music was accompanied by "avant-garde" nonsense in the program notes. Thus, of Ron Mazurek, we were told that he

> acknowledges the influence of I Ching in choosing the number of sections of the work [*Trigrams*] and their order; the number eight represents the infinite.

Not to be outdone, in his *Ostrom* Dino Ghezzo was said to explore

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> possible stylistic connections between modern jazz, twelve-tone techniques, Eastern European folk practices, and Bali [*sic*] folk music, in a quasi-improvisatory manner, in which the tape controls the flow of musical ideas on which the players created bridges . . . .

Joseph Amato, in *Libera,* claimed to have combined Yugoslavian ethnic flutes, tarogato, clarinet, prepared piano, soprano vocalizing, and violin, with the following rantings of a "split personality":

> Where am I?
> Where are you?! You're here . . . You're here with me!
> But, I'm alone.
> Who are all these people? Hello!
> Oh!, my head. I see so many . . .
> Hello!! Only one I see. I scream yet no one sees.
> I see but no one hears.
> Help me! My head, I can't move. I feel so . . . weak . . . tired . . . .

This last work, at least, was the most forthright of the evening, since it brought the audience into a fairly complete encounter with the cacophony of street culture and its parade of human misery.

The programs devoted to the Polish art song, which soprano Juliana Gondek performed in two concerts on September 13 and 24, were another thing entirely. Gondek, supported by a Solo Recitalist Grant from the NEA, gave us a rare opportunity to hear a little-known and very rich musical literature. It was troubling that her recitals were not well attended: one can only wonder at the lack of interest on the part of music lovers in such rarely performed works. Then too, in an earlier day a good part of the Polish community would have come to hear what is recognizably its own music.

In any event, the songs which Gondek gave us—they were drawn from the University of Southern California Polish Music Reference Center—document, above all, the interplay of Polish and French high culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is evidenced not only in the Chopin songs (these proved the most markedly influenced by Polish folk music) but also in the Poulenc cycle, *Huit chansons polonaises*, inspired by poems of the 1831 Polish Insurrection. The French connection also proved to be a significant element in the more recent works of Grzyna Bacewicz (1909-69) and Witold Lutoslawski (b. 1913): Bacewicz's "Big Bells and Little Bells" evokes the harmonic sonority of Debussy; and Lutoslawski's 1957 cycle, *Five Songs for Soprano* (of which Gondek performed three), is twelve-tone music honed to achieve a delicate chromatic impressionism.

Other highlights on this worthwhile program were Karol Szymanowski's (1882-1937) lush *Songs of the Impassioned Muezzin*, a post-Romantic work reflecting the fascination of the period for Near Eastern culture, and Tadeusz Baird's (1928-81) starkly whimsical *Five Songs for Children*. The latter songs were translated from the Polish by Gondek herself. Songs of Jozef Eisner (Chopin's teacher), Stanislaw Moniuszko (1819-72), and the famous pianist and president of the Polish Republic Ignacy Jan Paderewski, among others, conveyed a convincing impression of two centuries of lively cultural ferment. Indeed, Polish art music seems to have reflected a healthy balance between cosmopolitan influences and long-standing cultural tradition.

To some extent, Gondek's interest in bringing the work of many minor composers to our attention had the effect of diminishing our sense of the achievements of Poland's greater talents. One would like to have heard, for example, the whole of the Lutoslawski cycle—better known in its subsequent orchestral transcription. Perhaps, too, the contemporary-sounding Lutoslawski was shortened in order to make room in the program for a larger amount of long-lined romantic melody and sentiment.

Considerations of programming aside, it was not solely the multitude of talents that seemed to blur some of the musical effect of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the programs. There were too few dynamic and stylistic contrasts in either Gondek's singing or Peter Grunberg's piano accompaniment. Gondek has a pleasing voice, but, unfortunately, she shuns frank declamation, relying instead on smooth *bel canto* singing, supplemented by facial expressions and hand movements, to convey the mood of a song. Similarly, Grunberg's playing was marked by an unvaried though attractive tone and by monotonously regular, if well-realized, phrasing.

But these failures are minor ones when one considers the program's unusual virtues: first, Gondek had communicated her utter devotion to a distinctive artistic tradition of considerable quality. Even more important, perhaps, as an artist she gave us a sense, very rare these days, that art has something to do with beauty and the aspirations of the spirit.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Television

"Art of the Western World" on PBS

by Eric Gibson

Any serious college student who has sat in the darkness of a lecture hall watching the parade of color slides that forms the backbone of most art history lectures must have wondered whether there was not a better way to learn about the subject. With their distortions of scale, color, and texture, their cavalier treatment of historical context—Queen Nefertiti cheek by jowl with a Warhol *Marilyn*, say—slides are, at best, an unsatisfactory learning tool.

Small wonder, then, that someone should have proposed television as an alternative. Television has mobility and range. The camera can travel to distant places and position itself so as to capture a view of the greatest breadth or the most oppressive proximity. Television is also more versatile than the slide projector; being in a sense "live," it can also be made more lively. Finally, because almost every home has a television set, the medium offers the seductive prospect of "democratizing" culture, of bringing it to many who would not otherwise avail themselves of culture's riches.

But how many "cultural" television programs does it take to prove that television is the *wrong* medium for the study of art, to show that, primitive as they are, even slides are a better bet when one does not have access to the real thing? The latest attempt to compress the entire history of art into the space of a television screen was the Public Broadcasting Service's nine-part presentation called *Art of the Western World*.[1] Here is a television art show that comes with all the usual trappings. It has a catchy subtitle—*From Ancient Greece to Post-Modernism* (whew!), an affable host in the person of Michael Wood—an historian and veteran of many similar ventures—and an expensive companion book.[2] The only departure from convention is relatively minor: supplementing Wood's narration are the observations of various scholars called in along the way to talk about subjects in their specific fields. Thus, in Episode One, John Boardman makes a brief appearance to speak on Greek sculpture. In later episodes, John White talks about the Renaissance, Rosalind Krauss about Pop and Minimalism, and so on. But in every other way, the show amounts to the standard television culture program.

Using television as its medium isn't all that's wrong with *Art of the Western World*, but it's a large part of it. Is it because television brings art into the living room? No, although its irrepressible desire to entertain does lead to terrible distortions. The reason *Art of the Western World* was

1 *Art of the Western World* aired on PBS during October and November. It was produced by WNET, New York, in association with TV South of Great Britain, ORF of Austria, and Television Española, S.A. The executive producer was Perry Miller Adato.

2 *Art of the Western World*, by Bruce Cole and Adelheid Gealt; Summit Books, 346 pages, $35.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

destined to fail is that television deprives the viewer of a vital one-on-one relationship with the actual work of art, even as it pretends to take the viewer closer to that work. And the production goes one step further: it suggests, insidiously, that the televised image can replace the work of art.

A few years ago, on an airplane en route to Washington (where I was going to review a show at the Phillips Collection), I struck up a conversation with a fellow passenger who, upon learning what I did for a living, recalled his own involvement with art. He had grown up in rural Virginia with the vague notion that art was only for the effete. One day, to his dismay, his high-school teacher took his class on a trip to Washington's museums; at the Phillips, he saw Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* for the first time. When he realized what had gone into the painting and how it was put together, and particularly, he said, when he noticed the immediacy of the artist's touch, he was filled with an excitement that had never left him—and that changed his opinions about art. I find it hard to believe that television could have done the same thing for him.

Television speaks the wrong language when it comes to the visual arts. Watching a program like *Art of the Western World* is a little like hearing poetry converted into Morse code: you keep thinking about what you're missing. Take, for example, the mobile camera. Supposedly television's greatest asset, the camera turns out instead to be a crippling liability: when it scans a painting, sculpture, or building, it moves at someone else's speed, not yours, so you find yourself either rushed through the experience or detained for what seems an age. Worse than its speed, though, is the camera's movement. You need either to be still to look at a work of art or to move at your own pace. Television takes you prisoner, picking you up and setting you in motion in a way that deprives you of all control over your senses. You feel as if you are watching the world from a moving train.

The mobile camera also chops up an image, sacrificing a sense of the whole to a flurry of details. Pity the viewer who sees Velázquez's famous painting *Las Meninas* for the first time on *Art of the Western World*: with the camera at close range, jumping from head to head, it is hard to know exactly where everyone stands in the picture—at least until the camera backs up for an overall shot. As for more complex paintings, such as Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the camera doesn't even bother looking at the painting as a whole; it simply zeroes in on the grotesqueries at close range. We're still on the train, but things have gotten worse. Now we have to look out the window through a straw.

Television can offer only two limited perspectives to viewers: images in close-up, or wide-angle, bird's-eye panoramas (of which there are plenty in *Art of the Western World*). That is to say, it can deliver to viewers only a fragment of the world it claims to represent. One comes to understand while watching this series how the term "talking heads" evolved to describe the disembodied faces that fill the screen and address us from inside the magic box.

There is no way that television can present a self-contained, integrated representation of the world in the way that a painting does. In other words, there is no counterpart in television for the interior space of painting. This of course is considered to be one of television's strengths, since the televised image is free of painting's theatrical artificiality and stasis, allowing the camera to roam over the work of art. But this means that television must do without one of the most important elements in art. Televised images of paintings and sculptures are flattened into two-dimensional postcard images, so that the drama of, say, Caravaggio's dynamic foreshortenings is blunted. And if television dulls paintings and sculptures in this way, architecture is completely beyond the medium's reach.

As it happens, there is quite a lot of architecture in the *Art of the Western World* series. The Pantheon, Gothic cathedrals, Robert Adam's Sion House, and the Villa

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Savoie by Le Corbusier are all dealt with at length, as are other monuments. Michael Wood even goes out of his way to point out that the Pantheon is as much about the experience of space as about architectural structure. But no matter how inventive the camera angle—and in the Pantheon sequences it becomes quite acrobatic—television has no way of conveying the intangible, exhilarating sensation of spatial expansion or constriction that architecture gives us.

As if all this weren't bad enough, one often gets the feeling that the producers of this television series are terrified that the audience will find looking at works of art boring. In one sense, perhaps, they're right. Watching the camera circle Claus Sluter's *Well of Moses*, the great Gothic sculpture in Dijon, one feels nothing and grows impatient. No one could remain unmoved in the presence of the real thing, but when the miniaturizing, blurring box comes between us and the object, boredom is a perfectly understandable response.

Less understandable, or at least less forgivable, are the ways the producers have attempted to forestall their viewers' boredom. One favorite ploy is to embellish the production with music. There is music throughout *Art of the Western World* and, as in the movies, it functions as a narrative cue. In a movie thriller, music that is intended to excite us announces a violent act; similarly, when *The Garden of Earthly Delights* appears on the screen, we know what to think because its apocalyptic imagery is supplemented by a crashing musical score. If only it could have been left at that.

Unfortunately, the producers appear to have been more than normally afraid to bore viewers with their material, since they went even further, resorting to dramatizations to ward off drowsiness. With Goya's *The Third of May, 1808*, the camera pans slowly from right to left (in close-up, of course), moving from the firing squad to the row of victims. Once it reaches the famous central figure, with his arms upraised in a desperate gesture of supplication, we hear the deafening report of a firearm. And when we get to Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, a veritable *son et lumière* spectacle unfolds before us. With the painting in the background, silhouetted figures wearing period costumes and carrying muskets mill around wildly, and the soundtrack noise swells from a single gunshot to a pitched battle complete with war cries from (one presumes) the shadowy figures struggling in front of us. Turning art-historical material into television pabulum, as such vignettes do, is really the ultimate admission of failure. The producers should have packed up and gone home after that.

In substance, this program is no worse than any other. But after so many such exercises the wonder is that no one has been able to come up with a better way of doing them. Like most productions of its kind, *Art of the Western World* is largely a travelogue; its sweeping panoramas of cities such as Florence encourage one to reach for one's passport rather than for a notebook. There are the usual glaring omissions (somehow Poussin didn't make the cut) and oversimplifications. When we get to Abstract Expressionism, for example, Clement Greenberg is interviewed on Jackson Pollock, but he only tells us about the moment that he "knew" Pollock was a major painter. There is not a word about how he came to this realization or what the aesthetic importance of Pollock's work might be. This interview is followed by Hans Namuth's film clips of Pollock at work, which in context appear entirely mindless. Considering that programs like *Art of the Western World* pride themselves on making art accessible and dispelling the "a child of six could do it" response to modern art, this is an extraordinarily derelict approach, confirming one's suspicion that what these programs really want is a "once over lightly" treatment of their subject. The notion of *educating* the public through what used to be called educational television seems not to have occurred to anyone concerned.

The greatest sin of *Art of the Western World* may simply be that, despite all efforts to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

contrary, it's boring. Michael Wood is a companionable enough guide, even if his perpetually intense enthusiasm quickly wears thin. I don't know if it's all those long, loving tourist shots, the show's pacing, or something else, but an hour of one of these shows feels like a very long time—even to someone interested in art.

Perhaps the only thing about the program that is at all interesting is its internal confusion. *Art of the Western World* is, in many respects, a series divided against itself, a jumble of competing viewpoints and political ideologies that never quite sorts itself out. The program is devoted to affirming the achievement and enduring relevance of the Western tradition in art; yet in the very first episode, on ancient Greece, we have to listen to Michael Wood politicize the subject in the same shabby, shallow way that is now familiar on our university campuses. Greece is described as a "slave state that manufactured pornography," and the Europe of the migrating tribes that dominated the continent after the fall of the Roman Empire is referred to as—don't laugh—"the Third World."

We are also treated to the requisite measure of feminist clichés. At the end of Episode Seven, "A Fresh View: Impressionism and Post-Impressionism," Griselda Pollock of the University of Leeds solemnly declares,

> From Manet to Picasso, from *Olympia* to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, male avant-garde artists have staked their claims as ambitious modernists on the bodies of women. The major paintings of European modernism are surprisingly often paintings of the female nude. The power men enjoy made women available for artistic experimentation and colonization . . . . [They] used women's bodies for their most extreme innovations and fantasies.

Again, pure politics; there is not an aesthetic idea anywhere in sight. And, as is often the case with such viewpoints, it is entirely self-serving. If one accuses Manet and Picasso of "staking their claims . . . on the bodies of women," one must also accuse every artist from the sculptor of the *Venus of Willendorf* onward of doing the same thing. Only somehow that doesn't seem as likely to yield political capital.

Fortunately, there isn't a great deal of this sort of thing in *Art of the Western World*. But what is odd here, and what epitomizes the schizophrenic intellectual nature of the series, is that at the beginning of the very next episode Christopher Green of the University of London talks at some length, and quite unapologetically, about Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* as a sexual picture. We are back to nudes and women's bodies again, as though Griselda Pollock had never existed. You'd have thought someone would have been more attentive to consistency.

Extraordinary though it seems, what we have here is a project that passes itself off as a college course. Students somewhere in this country are no doubt going to be made to sit through all nine episodes and be persuaded that it is gospel. What a travesty! College tuition waxes while the educational value of the curriculum wanes. The series has been partially underwritten by the Annenberg Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and anyone who remembers the fiasco twelve years ago, when the Metropolitan Museum almost ceded valuable exhibition space to produce mush like this under Annenberg's auspices, may well mop their brow in relief. The public had a narrow escape.

But even as a college course, *Art of the Western World* can't seem to make up its mind about just what it is. One naturally assumes, for example, that the companion book for the series is to be the text for the "course." Not so. Viewers are instructed to consult either of those two survey-course stalwarts, H. W. Janson's *History of Art* or Helen Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*. They're much better, needless to say, than either the television series or the book. But there's something oddly contradictory in the thinking behind the project. A television show and book are produced with the aim of getting students out of the darkened

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lecture hall and away from the stodgy textbooks. (In their preface to the companion book, Bruce Cole and Adelheid Gealt tell us they have "tried to tell this story clearly, with little of the cumbersome apparatus or terminology of art history.") Yet in the end one is directed to the stodgy textbooks anyway, as if in tacit acknowledgment that this glitzy project can't do its job as well as the more traditional method of slides and a textbook.

This is a correct assumption, of course. One recalls the art historian Erwin Panofsky's insistence that art books use only black and white illustrations because they are truer to a painting's tonal values than color illustrations. Panofsky claimed that, because of the distortions inherent in color prints, a person who knew a work from its illustration alone would be disappointed when he finally saw the real thing. For Panofsky, using black and white reproductions was a way of saving the public from itself and preserving the integrity and magical power of the original work of art.

In teaching art history, the darkened lecture hall may bear a closer physical resemblance to Plato's cave than a televised presentation; in using slides, the lecture-hall approach contains almost as many distortions. But it is in television that the greatest fallacies are to be found. Even more than the color reproductions that Panofsky deplored, television is likely to misrepresent reality. When it comes to teaching art history, I'm inclined to take Panofsky's thoughts on publishing as a model. If you can't see the original, don't try to manufacture it. Accepting the limitations of the lecture hall is worthwhile if in the end there can be greater fidelity to the original material. Michael Wood and the producers of *Art of the Western World* must have sensed this when they recommended the Janson and Gardner textbooks. At least in this one regard, their thinking was correct.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

What was the Congress of Cultural Freedom? *by Hilton Kramer*
On the rites of editing letters *by Gloria G. Fromm*
Paris art chronicle *by Karen Wilkin*
The humanities debate at Williams *by Roger Kimball*
Paul Nizan *by Renee Winegarten*
García Lorca and his times *by Mark Falcoff*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

Duplicity in Sussex

by James W. Tuttleton

In a footnote to *A Ring of Conspirators: Henry James and His Literary Circle, 1895-1915*,[1] Miranda Seymour remarks that "a glance at the social history of the British arts shows a striking lack of groups of novelists." She acknowledges that British novelists have gotten to know each other, and that there have even been "coteries of writers," but for her a coterie lacks the "defined artistic purpose" that distinguished the Lake Poets or the East Anglian School of painters. Even Bloomsbury does not qualify as a "group," for, "while including many novelists," it was merely "an aggregation of philosophers, historians, poets, and painters." It is just as well that this remark appears at the end of Ms. Seymour's book, for the reader is spared the task of trying to determine, at the outset, if Henry James's "circle" was a group, a coterie, or an aggregation. On reflection, it doesn't much matter, for Ms. Seymour is so wonderfully vague about definitions, and so delightfully entertaining about James and his friends, that one need give no further thought to the matter.

What we have in *A Ring* is the group portrait of a number of writers who settled in Sussex near Henry James at Lamb House, Rye, and who, according to Ms. Seymour, exhibited—among other talents—the fine art of personal duplicity and malice. The group's principal members included Stephen Crane, who briefly lived at Brede Place, six miles inland from Rye, before his untimely death from tuberculosis in 1900; Ford Madox Ford, who moved to nearby Pent Farm in 1896; Joseph Conrad, who sublet Pent Farm when Ford took himself off to Stocks Hill and Winchelsea; and H. G. Wells, who, when his health collapsed after years of nonstop London hackwork, settled in 1898 in the coastal town of Sandgate. During the twenty-year span of Ms. Seymour's group portrait, all of the authors shuttled back and forth to London for shorter or longer periods, and some eventually left for good. But there is enough of a regional angle here to have induced Nicholas Delbanco to write *Group Portrait: Conrad, Crane, Ford, Wells & James* in 1982 and Iain Finlayson to provide *The Sixth Continent: A Literary History of Romney Marsh* in 1986.[2] Ms. Seymour has few facts to add to these previous accounts, but her work does differ in two or three important ways.

The first difference between *A Ring* and its predecessors is, as she remarks, "my angle of approach, a circular one which encompasses the group while retaining a focus on Henry James." Circular it is, for Ms. Seymour, a novelist, has abandoned straight-

1 *A Ring of Conspirators: Henry James and His Literary Circle, 1895-1915*, by Miranda Seymour; Houghton Mifflin, 327 pages, $19.95.

2 *Group Portrait*, by Nicholas Delbanco, was published by William Morrow; *The Sixth Continent*, by Iain Finlayson, was published by Atheneum.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

forward narrative in favor of a series of chapters that violate linear chronology in tracing the interconnected and often seriously strained friendships. It is a method that, in this case, works admirably. The second difference is that Ms. Seymour writes superlatively well.

The Romney Marsh locale does not prevent her from divagating to London or elsewhere for engaging chapters on James's other friendships, especially those that offer some sexual tang. Hence we are treated to an account of James's more or less intimate women friends, including Minnie Temple, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Elizabeth Robins, Lucy Clifford, Violet Hunt, and Edith Wharton—not to speak of the egregious Miss Emelie Grigsby, a Millie Theale look-alike from Kentucky, who spread rumors all over London that she was the model for the Dove and that James was madly in love with her. Ms. Seymour concludes, appropriately, that these were all platonic friendships. Next, James's more or less intimate men friends get their innings, especially Percy Lubbock, John Hugh Smith, Howard Sturgis, and the three beautiful young men with whom James became embarrassingly infatuated toward the end of his life—the dazzlingly handsome American Hendrik Anderson, sculptor of those awful gigantic nudes; the much-praised but so-so British writer Hugh Walpole; and the gorgeous young Irishman Jocelyn Persse, whose distinction was that he hadn't an idea in his head but cared for James. Ms. Seymour accurately describes these friendships as a reflection of "the era of lad-love," when

> the schoolmasters, clergymen and scholars of the Uranian group were circulating pamphlets and poems which, at their most idealistic, proposed adoration of the young male body without sex as the noblest form of love, along the lines of Walter Pater's magnificent essay on Winckelmann in which he argues that Winckelmann's pure love of beautiful young men "perfected his reconciliation to the spirit of Greek sculpture." (Not all Uranian works, it should be said, aspired to this elevated plane.)

James kept to the high road. When young Walpole offered his body to the novelist, James admirably replied, "I can't, I can't." Ms. Seymour remarks that "after some seven decades of cheerfully acknowledged and unregretted celibacy, it was an understandable response."

H. G. Wells first concocted the notion that there was "a ring of foreign conspirators plotting against British letters in the region of Rye." He meant of course the Americans James and Crane, who, along with Conrad, the Pole, were settled in Sussex near the convalescent Wells. Ford Madox Ford liked Wells's zany idea enough to repeat it in his memoir *Return to Yesterday* (1931), and even published a map in the book charting the aliens' invasion of Romney Marsh.

All of this is great fun, and it gives Ms. Seymour every opportunity to show the "conspirators" in their productive but sometimes bizarre relations. She has a novelist's gift for the arresting detail, for the complexities of human psychology, for a narrative form that is well paced and finely polished. There are many sharply etched vignettes here: James ambulating through Rye like a country squire; Conrad and Ford arguing all night over their collaboration on *The Inheritors* and *Romance*; Wells capering about on a broomstick during the Christmas party at Brede Place in 1899; the eagle with the motorcar, Edith Wharton, lifting James, as he put it, "far aloft in irresistible talons and under the flap of mighty wings" and depositing him "on dizzy and alien peaks"; Conrad's dispute with Wells on the inutility of politics; Wells's philistine attack on James in *Boon*; and Crane's poignant death. These stories have all been told before, but they are brought together here in such a lively and witty narrative that even specialists in the period will take pleasure in the book.

Less pleasurable, perhaps, is an undertone of cynicism running through the study. According to Ms. Seymour, these writers,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

far from constituting any kind of group or coterie, were deceitful men who praised their rivals publicly while slandering them in private. Though Conrad told Crane that he was a great writer, he later remarked, in Ms. Seymour's words, "that there was no point in expecting Crane's work to be remembered or written about." If James was "exquisitely polite to Conrad on social occasions and in his tributes to his work," he was also "cruelly patronizing behind his back," for he discouraged Lady Ottoline Morrell from meeting "so rough, so queer" an exotic. Conrad, for his part, praised Ford to his face but told their agent James Pinker that Ford was "a megalomaniac who imagines that he is managing the Universe and that everybody treats him with the blackest ingratitude . . . . I do not hesitate to say that there are cases, not quite as bad, under medical treatment." Meanwhile, though Wells praised Conrad's work to Ford—especially its "wonderful oriental style"—he later publicly satirized it and sneered at Conrad and Ford for their endless palaver about high art and *le mot juste*, ridiculing their pursuit of the perfect word "with singleness and intensity of purpose that made the kindred concentration of Henry James seem lax and large and pale." In his memoirs, Ford lied about them all in order to inflate his own importance.

Even so, each of these writers did offer face-to-face criticism. James gave blunt, unasked-for assessments to each of them—especially to the vindictive Wells—based on how *he* would have composed their books. Conrad thought Wells to be "the one honest thinker of the day," but saw his utopian optimism, according to Ms. Seymour, as insufficiently attentive "to the perfidious nature of human imbecility." Wells insulted poor James publicly in *Boon* by describing James's novels as "dead inventions," "tales of nothingness." The Jamesian novel, Wells wrote, is

> like a church lit but without a congregation to distract you, with every light and line focused on the high altar. And on the altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string.

James's response demolished Wells by defending the social utility of high art: "It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process." After James's death, when Rebecca West repeated Wells's point of view in her little book *Henry James* (1916), Wells complained to Hugh Walpole of a conspiracy on the part of the James cult:

> The old man [James] was a little treacherous to me in a very natural sort of way and the James cult has been overdone. Anyhow nothing I've ever written or said or anything anyone has ever written or said about James can balance the extravagant dirtiness of Lubbock and his friends in boycotting Rebecca West's book on him in *The Times Literary Supplement*. My blood still boils at the thought of those pretentious academic greasers conspiring to down a friendless girl (who can write any of them out of sight) in the name of loyalty to literature. It makes the name of James stink in my memory.

Rebecca West, it must be said, could certainly write, but she was hardly a friendless girl, as she was Wells's mistress at the time.

That artistic rivalry and personal irritations affected this group of novelists is unarguable. But there is something patronizing, even smugly moralistic, about Ms. Seymour's treatment of their inconsistencies and imperfections. The effect is of a music somehow off-key, especially in her treatment of James. And to this tonal dissonance I ascribe both a personal and a political reason.

Ms. Seymour's personal reason emerges quite clearly in the first chapter, where she declares that one of her motives for writing the book was the opportunity to write about the literary circle at Queen's Acre, "a handsome Victorian house on the edge of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Windsor Great Park," which was "the home of my great-great-uncle, Howard Sturgis, one of James's closest friends." (This inside view of Sturgis is the third point of difference between *A Ring* and its predecessors.)

Sturgis, to whom the book is dedicated, was one of the most flamboyant minor characters in a clan that included William Haynes Smith, Percy Lubbock, John Hugh Smith, Walter Berry, Edith Wharton, and Gaillard Lapsley. Evidently homosexual, yet precocious, talented, and witty, Howard Sturgis was, to Edith Wharton, the "drollest, kindest and strangest of men." In her memoir *A Backward Glance*, she described him as typically stretched out on a divan at Qu'Acre (as they abbreviated the name),

> his legs covered by a thick shawl, his hands occupied with knitting needles or embroidery silks, a sturdily built handsome man with brilliantly white wavy hair, a girlishly clear complexion, a black moustache, and tender mocking eyes under the bold arch of his black brows.

We are indebted to Ms. Seymour for a livelier and more personal account of Sturgis's life than is elsewhere available. But I am afraid that Henry James's devastating private response to Sturgis's amateur novel *Belchamber* (1904) has evoked in Ms. Seymour an excess of family feeling, with the result that she condemns James—who spoke only his literary convictions—as cruel and malicious and never to be forgiven. Throughout *A Ring of Conspirators*, James is described as a master of duplicity whose apparent kindnesses are merely hypocritical masks. This judgment leads Ms. Seymour almost invariably to misunderstand James—especially in his epistolary humor. Still, it is valuable to have more information about the literary taste of her great-great-uncle, who once announced to Lubbock: "I read only Henry, Edith and myself."

The political motive insinuates itself in Ms. Seymour's stray references to the social classes in England. James's interest in the swells leads her to a blunt condemnation of his social attitudes. And she concludes her book by remarking that "the most important conspiracy of all, as far as James's attitude to his literary neighbours was concerned," was "the conspiracy of class." For her, this writer had "a taste for what we still, old-fashionedly and unforgivably, call the upper classes." The view that James was a snob, that he panted after and aped the aristocracy, and that he expatriated himself so he could get into their castles and country houses, is a very old charge. It was first raised by nationalistic American reviewers who resented James's criticism of the cultural backwardness and vulgarity of the United States and so wrote him off as a Tory sycophant. But it is surprising to hear it from an English critic in this day and age, especially in view of the substantial mass of information, developed by Leon Edel and others, about James's social and political views on England in the late nineteenth century. The point is of so much importance that at least *some* of the evidence contradicting Ms. Seymour's allegation deserves to be adduced.

Clearly, James did maneuver to get into position to observe the lords and ladies in their natural habitat; thus his frequent dining out and weekends in the country during the early period of the "conquest" of London. He was keenly interested in what people of class, position, money, intelligence, grace, and mobility might do with the freedom life had conferred on them. Aristocratic life engaged him because, as he observed in *Transatlantic Sketches* (1875), the "constant sense of the beautiful scenic properties of English life" suggest that conservatism in England

> has all the charm, and leaves dissent and democracy nothing but their bald ‚logic. Conservatism has the cathedrals, the colleges, the castles, the gardens, the traditions, the associations, the fine names, the better manners, the poetry; dissent has the dusky brick chapels in provincial by-streets, the names out of Dickens, the uncertain tenure of the *h*, and the poor *mens sibi conscia recti*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

James's obvious preference here for the forms, institutions, and manners of a civilization that had been produced by English conservatism should be seen in the light of his severe criticism of the cultural thinness of America, as expressed, for example, in *The American Scene*. In America—in the absence of "continuity, responsibility, transmission"—"there couldn't be any manners to speak of" because "the basis of privacy was somehow wanting for them; and . . . nothing, accordingly, no image, no presumption of constituted relations, possibilities, amenities, in the social, the domestic order, was inwardly projected."

Democracy, James observed, "represents an immense boon," but at the same time, he wanted to know, "what does the enjoyment of the boon represent?" The "huge democratic broom" in America had swept the social field clean, and James could only be appalled at how "the working of democratic institutions" had managed vulgarly to "determine and qualify manners, feelings, communications, modes of contact and conceptions of life." The only consolation he could take was in his hope for the eventual development of distinguished cultural institutions in America, "the possible evolution of manners, the latent drama to come." He looked forward to "the great adventure of a society reaching into the apparent void for the amenities, the consummations, after having earnestly gathered in so many of the preparations and necessities."

Ms. Seymour suggests that it is a sin that James "showed no marked aversion to the company of the aristocracy." But this is not really the case. He was always ambivalent about them, as this remark in 1889 to E. L. Godkin, editor of *The Nation* magazine, will attest:

> Your account of your visit to Lord C. left me with so charming an impression that it bribed me to accept his invitation, though I have been sedulously avoiding the British country house almost ever since you left. I am less and less capable of it, though I managed, shortly after your flight, a glittering Saturday to Monday at Waddesdon, void of purpose or communion, save for some happy moments with Mrs. Mahlon [Sands].

Long before the period covered by Ms. Seymour's study, James had taken his measure of the aristocracy and had largely forsworn its company, although he intermittently hoped, fondly as it turned out, that the upper classes might one day live up to his definition of what a genuine aristocracy should be.

Since the upper classes failed him, let us ask the essential question of what James did with his observation of these glittering aristocrats. Can anyone doubt that Lord Deepmere in *The American* is a fool? That Lord Lambeth and the English ladies in "An International Episode" are supercilious bores? That the baroness in *The Europeans* is a fortune-hunting liar? That Lord Warburton in *The Portrait of a Lady* is a phony? Or that the De Bellegardes of *The American* are moral monsters? James's criticism of the aristocracy grows throughout his career, as does his interest in down-and-outers like M. Nioche, the girl in the telegraph cage, servants like Brooksmith, poor governesses and tutors like those of *The Turn of the Screw* and "The Pupil."

Even though James leaned toward a class system that had produced the cathedrals and colleges and castles, he increasingly understood the British aristocracy to be corrupt. "The upper classes are too refined," he once observed, "and the lower classes are too miserable." In an 1886 letter to Charles Eliot Norton he remarks "the already very damaged prestige of the English upper class" and observes that

> the condition of that body seems to me to be in many ways much the same rotten and collapsible one as that of the French aristocracy before the revolution—minus cleverness and conversation; or perhaps it's more like the heavy, congested and depraved Roman world

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> upon which the barbarians came down . . . . At all events, much of English life is grossly materialistic and wants blood-letting.

James's observations here testify to his sense of the British aristocracy's deterioration toward the end of the nineteenth century and reflect his disappointment with the practical effects of that decline on English society. His keen disillusionment is echoed by Christina Light in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), who complains that the English aristocracy is

> the old regime again, the rottenness and extravagance, bristling with every iniquity and every abuse, over which the French Revolution passed like a whirlwind; or perhaps even more a reproduction of the Roman world in its decadence, gouty, apoplectic, depraved, gorged and clogged with wealth and spoils, selfishness and scepticism, and waiting for the onset of the barbarians.

Ms. Seymour's claim that James conspired to disguise his class prejudice, then, seems hard to sustain. Given a choice between decadence or barbarism, he declined both—although the aristocracy was, for the novelist, unquestionably more picturesque.

In his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), Wells was later to complain that the ring of novelists in Sussex might have added up to something if only they had been willing to accept his brand of scientific education and to capitulate to his utopian social ideas.

> Instead of being based on a central philosophy, they started off at a dozen points; they were impulsive, uncoordinated, wilful. Conrad, you see, I count uneducated, Stephen Crane, Henry James, the larger part of the world of literary artistry . . . . The science and art of education was not adequate for the taming and full utilization of these more powerfully receptive types and they lapsed into arbitrary inconsistent and dramatized ways of thinking and living. With a more expert and scientific educational process all that might have been different.

It is hard to imagine what Wells might have meant, although our experience of writers' unions in this century suggests the ominousness of a party line. To have constituted themselves a coterie of novelists devoted to Wells's social and literary agenda *would* have been to produce a conspiracy, and a ghastly perversion of their talents at that. We are therefore fortunate that the authors of *The Golden Bowl*, *Lord Jim*, and *The Good Soldier* went their separate ways, leaving the author of *Boon* and *A Modern Utopia* to inflict his collectivist fantasy on others.

In short, no conspiracy of novelistic method or social vision seems evident in this group of literary individualists. Ms. Seymour is right to conclude her book by remarking that "neither criticism, praise nor collaboration could influence any one of the writers away from their chosen approach and style." Wells's notion of a ring of conspirators was thus, as it is for Ms. Seymour, a mere conceit, a rhetorical device whose principal function in *A Ring of Conspirators* is to give her group biography its organization. The writers' proximity to each other in Sussex seems more the consequence of landscape loveliness, village simplicity, suburban economy, and railway accessibility to London than of a coordinated literary agenda. We are left, however, with Ms. Seymour's undue emphasis on the ambivalence, hypocrisy, wishful thinking, and bitterness that marred some of the literary relationships of James, Crane, Ford, Wells, and Conrad. In exaggerating their ambition, vanity, egotism, and rivalry, Ms. Seymour is rather grandly inquisitorial. But her account reminds us that writers are not immune to the follies and vices that afflict us all. The personal pettiness of her authors, however, now seems minor beside the scope of their literary achievements. In any event, though rivals, they are now folded into a single party and have left us the literary symbol of their work perfected in death. I believe that we need to take Ms. Seymour's class bias into account and dismiss the old canard that James was a rank snob.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Otherwise, none of her exaggerations should prevent us from having a great deal of pleasure in this lively account of James and his literary circle.

A chronicle of vanishings

Richard Howard No Traveller. Knopf, 93 pages, $18.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

Richard Howard, who celebrated his sixtieth birthday this year, has had a remarkable literary career. He has written four plays, a volume of critical essays, nine books of poetry, and over one hundred and fifty translations from the French, among them Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and works by Gide, Cocteau, and Camus. His current project is the gargantuan task of translating Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. If one adds to these bibliographical facts some biographical ones—that, for example, Howard was reading at the age of two, was writing poetry at four, worked for a while as a lexicographer, and once suggested in an interview that a person devoted to the arts could live through books—one is tempted to observe that Howard has come as close as anyone to living a life that is thoroughly devoted to literature.

It is therefore ironic that Howard's poems—most of which are in the form of dramatic narratives "spoken" by figures from history or by imagined characters—have often been criticized for their lack of personal details. Norman Friedman's essay on Howard, for example, published in the latest (1985) edition of *Contemporary Poets*, is typical of the critical response. Howard, writes Friedman, is "so over-civilized, so full of grace, learning, polish, and elegance, as to seem the victim of his own gifts, keeping himself and his life—even when he does write about these things—at such a distance from the poems that they emerge as snowflakes under glass." Howard's poetic program, Friedman goes on to assert, is primarily one of "evasion."

To expect unfiltered autobiography from a poet whose life has by his own admission revolved around books may be unrealistic. But even if one disregards Howard's own exceptionally literary life, one wonders about the critical propriety of demanding autobiography from *any* poet. To be sure, one of the common critical assumptions of our day is that the highest level of poetic achievement can only be attained by incorporating in the poems data gleaned from the poet's private life. But even if this is true, even if one agrees in principle that certain kinds of emotions are difficult to evoke without resorting to autobiographical facts, it would still be wrong to make a hard and fast rule demanding of every poet that *Thou shalt have autobiography in thy poetry*. A more useful criticism of poetry devoid of such details is that the verse does not speak adequately to our lives, that it does not address the human predicament in any wide sense. Unfortunately, this is not what Howard is accused of. Most often he is charged with *evading reality*. The critics expounding this opinion often seem to suggest that, by simply choosing to include the particulars of his life, the poet will solve every aesthetic problem he faces. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

No Traveller consists of ten short poems and two long narratives. Nearly all are written in the voices of others. Among these are Auguste Rodin's Italian apprentice, who describes an admirer's visit to the master's studio ("A Sorcerer's Apprentice"); Virginia Woolf, who entertains an idea for a novel about Byron ("Stanzas in Bloomsbury"); the American dancer Loie Fuller, who in a 1905 letter begs Madame Curie for radium, which Fuller hopes will replace the lethal costume paint she has been using in her performances ("Famed Dancer Dies of Phosphorus Poisoning"); two Americans in Paris in the early 1950s who write letters home about an American poet they've spotted in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the City of Light ("Even in Paris"); and a German archeologist in Greece who contemplates the absence of spirituality in the world ("Oracles").

In "Love Which Alters," Marcel Proust ponders some possible titles for the fictional work which, as Howard's Proust admits with engaging modesty, "has become a book this time, I think":

> How does it sound—*Stalactites of the Past? . . . of Melted Days?* Is there a music in it—*Stalactites of Melted Days?* Or how about
>
> *Reflections,* wait, *Images—What is Seen in the Patina . . . Mirrors of the Dream? Belated Days?* Oh, I have others . . .

This draws forth a chuckle, but Howard hopes to do more here than amuse his readers. He adopts the French author's dilemma—here entirely imagined by Howard, but certainly not beyond the pale of possibility—in order to voice his own problems in translating Proust's (or indeed anyone's) work. Having figures from the past or imagined characters address his own dilemmas as a poet and translator is a common approach for Howard. "I don't see why/people can't look things up, I always do," complains Howard's Proust, and it is a comment one can imagine the lexicographer-cum-poet muttering to himself on occasion. One therefore *does* get a sense of Howard's life—his mental life, at any rate—through his dramatic narratives. For most readers, however, these kinds of disclosures evidently don't pack enough of an emotional wallop.

"A Sorcerer's Apprentice" provides an occasion for Howard to examine what he believes to be a prevalent attitude on the part of his readers. In this poem, Alexander Gow has travelled from Scotland to Rodin's studio in Paris to inquire about the status of a sculpture Gow has commissioned. Once there, Gow leaves a letter for the absent Rodin complaining that a mere apprentice is working on his sculpture, a sculpture for which, as Gow writes, "you have received my thousand pounds." What has really prompted Gow's visit, however, is Gow's burning desire to know, as the apprentice informs Rodin, "how you went about your work,/was there a model, who might that model be,/and—without a breath between—was the model I?" Gow's importunings, of course, are those of every indiscreet reader of Howard's poems who wants to know *what* (and if possible *who*) is behind the poems. The indelicate Gow demands to know all that has been withheld; he longs not for the finished sculpture, but, as the apprentice puts it, to be privy to the "*rapport*/between man's life and the art which it inspired."

If issues like this do indeed constitute important elements of Howard's "real" life—which is to say his internal life—would it not be dishonest of him to furnish his readers with autobiography and imbue it with a spurious significance? Why are Howard's readers reluctant to take him at his word that artistic matters are of great importance to him and that they deserve to be placed at the center of his verse? Are not critics rather presumptuous in telling Howard exactly what the subject matter of his poems should be?

Another poem in *No Traveller* that comments slyly on Howard's artistic *Anschauung* is "Famed Dancer Dies of Phosphorus Poisoning." "My dancers have to move against a light/which cannot move: its source is fixed," writes Loie Fuller in her letter to Madame Curie. Fuller, who explored the possibilities of illuminated costumes and costume paint in her dances, goes on:

> . . . yet what if light itself could move—could dance?
> The very darkness would be visible!
> As I understand it, you have found the way
> our costumes and our limbs themselves might be
> made luminous, without depending on
> the placement of a lamp or two offstage . . .
> Endued with the substance which I hear you have named
> by a happy inspiration *radium,*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we'd have no further need of phosphorus
which blackens in no time on human skin.
They say your new-found, final element
generates a light within itself
and would inspire—were you to let me have
the merest feather-touch of such a thing—
a freedom unsuspected by the world
of illusion which we artists live within.

I do not ask for charity, Madame—
only your presence, which I know would make
the soul of kindess the body of kindness too.
Come see my dancers, come see me! and if
you judge my craving worthy of my craft,
I know you will be generous . . . .

Initially, it looks as if Howard is suggesting—self-critically—that any hiding of the self, any blackening of the skin, will result in death (as it did for Fuller). The poem's title and epigraph, taken from a 1928 issue of *Le Figaro*, tell us that Fuller died of poisoning "said to be the consequence of many years' exposure to costume paint." What Howard really wishes to underscore, however, is that Fuller's decision to expose herself to Curie did nothing to convince the scientist to come to her aid. Elsewhere in her letter Fuller expresses the hope that by revealing herself without costume to Curie's "own inquiring gaze,/the chances of convincing you would be/far beyond what my uncertain words/might win." Exposing oneself to gain the favor of one's readers—this is exactly what Howard's readers and critics have been imploring him to do. Yet if Fuller's revealing of herself to Curie's "inquiring gaze" didn't get her anywhere, Howard suggests, why should anyone assume it will work for him?

In "Even in Paris," which is written in the form of letters from Ivo and Richard (two Americans visiting Paris) to Roderick (who has returned to the States), there is much that alludes to Howard's aesthetic outlook and concerns. But here the self-reflexiveness serves as a springboard to issues not having to do exclusively with art. In Ivo's first letter to Roderick—who is clearly intended to recall Henry James's character Roderick Hudson—she observes that "you are repeatedly missed,/and it is a poor, *showy* charity/on your part to leave us for . . . Schenectady." This, of course, is what Howard has been accused of doing: leaving the scene of the crime for some remote Schenectady of the mind. "Paris is being visited/(*graced* is hardly the word) by Crispin himself!" gushes Richard, who first identifies Wallace Stevens. Once one learns, however, that Stevens never visited Paris, one understands that this entire outpouring of words is the result of a false sighting. Clearly the imagined Stevens is meant to serve as a kind of literary understudy to Howard: both are "no travellers" in reality, though each has prompted endless imaginative speculation on the part of their admirers. When Richard notes that the man thought to be Stevens at one point "loomed, one big black lump/in a circle of besieging light," the words seem to describe Howard as well. He too has been shielding himself over the years from the "besieging" gaze of his readers.

And yet there are deeper truths that this poem touches on than those having to do exclusively with the dilemmas of a practicing poet. Richard the Stevens-spotter is also a poet-worshipper; he writes to Roderick that "if you have been denied/such aptitudes of worship [as he has been granted by his "sighting" of Stevens], I pity you." The point here, of course, is that spiritual and emotional fulfillment may very well be achieved through lies, misunderstandings, and false sightings; and that, despite our best intentions *not* to deify someone, we may find ourselves doing it all the same. Like Sebastian Knight's idolizing half brother in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, who pursues his object of devotion halfway around Europe, Howard's Richard derives considerable fulfillment from someone whom he has invented to satisfy his own needs. (In Nabokov's novel, incidentally, the half brother pursues Knight to his deathbed in a darkened hospital room at night, where the half brother is afforded

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a final moment of consummation in the presence of his dying hero—"I was learning something every instant" the half brother gravely declares—only to learn in the morning from a nurse that he had spent the night at the foot of the wrong bed.)

Ivo offers a far more sober view of the world than that of the romantic Richard. In one letter she describes Stevens as "an apathetic mushroom in grey flannel." Her account of the poet inside Sainte Chapelle, the site of a December *concert spirituel*, reads, in part:

> . . . while we waited, a sudden winter sun,
> clearly bored with Catholic
> festivals—Christmas especially,
> which is only for servants—dim, dull, divine,
> changed the chapel to glory,
> the entire west wall luminous—alive.
> All at once, sitting there, bald Richard began
> staring (across me) at this
> fat man under the windows, red or blue
> as the famished light devoured the famous
> glass . . .
>
> He might have had anybody's
> face—absolutely unremarkable,
> as though he had been obliged to put up with
> something ready-made until
> more suitable features could be made
> to order—and since the proper article
> had never been delivered,
> he had gone about in this blank disguise
> the greater part of his life!

The irony, of course, is that Ivo, the brash and uninhibited hostess, as one is informed elsewhere, of "ruinous soirees," is the character who paints the most vivid portraits of the man mistaken for Stevens. Richard, on the other hand, says nothing that does not reflect his adulation: "He stood stock still," the poet-worshipper observes solemnly at one point, "and I think it was awe he felt/ at how the visual could turn/visionary." If the Richard figure lends credence to the idea that there are viable forms of spiritual fulfillment available in the modern secular world, Ivo throws this hopeful view into some doubt by being the one so refreshingly

"Tour de Force: Nobody does the Met like Paul Magriel."
—Jed Perl, *Vogue*

A CONNOISSEUR'S
GUIDE TO THE MET

THE BEST OF THE
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
IN FOUR 1-HOUR TOURS

By Paul Magriel and John T. Spike

Now at bookstores.
VINTAGE BOOKS
A Random House Company

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in touch with the world around her. Howard's ambivalence toward Richard—who after all seems to be a spokesman for Howard's own views of the enormous possibilities of imagination unhindered by truth (which is to say, a spokesman for the possibilities of art)—gives this poem a satisfyingly complex texture.

What also lends it a satisfying texture, oddly enough, is its self-reflexiveness. The numerous remarks in the poems of *No Traveller* that one finds oneself mentally ascribing to Howard—"Incessant guests are quite as bad as solitary jail"; "There is a kind of nosiness no one can/hold out against"; "Only shyness made him seem/a touch insolent"—shouldn't be viewed as simply the self-reflexive thoughts of a besieged poet. They should also be taken as evidence of a wish on Howard's part to acknowledge and honor all the correspondences that exist between himself and the characters who narrate the poems. In celebrating these small patches of the intellectual territory he shares with others, Howard's poetry is, despite all the artifice, and in its own modest way, life-affirming. As the narrator of "Oracles" says:

> When you believe *I am I* and *she*
> *is she*, you are unconscious;
> When you believe *I am she* and *she*
> *is I*, you are cognizant . . . .

The desire to forge bonds between himself and others—even if they *are* invented—lends these poems a kind of magnanimity and sympathy that is absent from so much of the *I am I* solipsism of contemporary poetry—especially the sort that is considered "confessional."

Howard's reluctance to bare the facts of his life reverberates in another important way as well. For Howard, to bring to light the external facts of his own life is to run the risk of overdefining that life, to make it too much the captive of an assigned role. As the narrator of "Concerning K" puts it: "The self, divine in each of us, is not/to be fully entered into. Manifest here,/or there, whereof these polaroids report/enough." For this poet, to lay open the self overmuch is to empty it of its richness and strangeness, and to risk betraying what is, for Howard, the last spiritual frontier. (Thus the archeologist-narrator of "Oracles," who complains bitterly that a "place of prophecy" in Greece is turning into "a Scholars' Retreat.") In Howard's view, we are all better off—again, the words are those given to the narrator of "Concerning K"—"more oddly luminous for being/so terribly hard to make out."

There are times when Howard's conceits are difficult to fathom, and when his quicksilver wit goes against the emotional thrust of the poetry. There are also times when the language could be more luminous and charged. Yet on the whole Howard's poetry succeeds very well, and this can be attributed at least in part to its dependence on certain insights—the persistence of spiritual yearning, the wish to find common ground with others, the steadfast refusal to abdicate the imagination—that come from a genuine understanding of human life: from the very thing Howard is so often accused of ignoring.

We may be given some sense of a new direction for Howard in a poem that has been published in the seventy-fifth anniversary issue of *The New Republic* (November 6, 1989). "For Robert Phelps, Dead at 66" is a eulogy for a friend who recently died of Parkinson's disease. It contains much in the way of unmediated revelation of Howard's feelings about the death of his friend. Obviously, this is a shift for the poet, and it is difficult to resist speculating whether this new poetic direction was prompted, at least in part, by the recent upsurge of homosexual activism that is the result of the AIDS crisis. For what AIDS activists have demanded from homosexuals is greater personal commitment to political and social causes—exactly the kind of thing Howard's aesthetic strategy has until now refused to accommodate. The "Silence = Death" motto that has been the rallying cry of AIDS activists is used by Howard in this new

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poem, which seems to signal an end to his own disinclination to speak about himself in the first person. It will be interesting to see if this new poem is a prologue to writing the kind of poetry his critics have always wanted.

Upstairs, downstairs

Kazuo Ishiguro The Remains of the Day. Knopf, 245 pages, $18.95

reviewed by David Gurewich

The landscape of the modern novel, especially the American one, seems to be full of violence—but not necessarily the kind that comes out of the barrel of a gun; rather, it comes from the writer's effort to subdue and kidnap the reader, forcing him into the writer's world. This turns landscape into a battlefield, and, while it may correctly reflect our *Zeitgeist*, it also sends many readers to seek solace in the calmer tradition of, say, Jane Austen.

Kazuo Ishiguro's remarkable new novel, *The Remains of the Day*—winner of England's Booker Prize for 1989—opens with a phrase that could hardly sound more traditional: "It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days." The pitch is perfect. It could be 1856 instead of 1956, except that the trip will be made in a Ford, not in a hansom; it will be spread over five or six days, although the distance is about a hundred miles (a character of a typical modern novel goes twice that distance to "take" lunch, or see a Stones concert). A final note to pull this momumental project together: the trip will be undertaken at the suggestion of the hero's *American* employer. The reader has been kidnapped—or should I say lured?

The first-person narrator is an English butler named Stevens, no first name given—that would be improper, and at odds with the tradition. Yet Stevens has little in common with P. G. Wodehouse's lovable caricatures. He is a fully realized character, through whom the author manages the world of his novel as sure-handedly as Stevens himself manages the beloved estate of Darlington Hall. It is the masters who are the supporting characters here.

Stevens is getting on now, perhaps in his sixties, and is, as he himself confesses, "responsible for a series of small errors in the carrying out of my duties," trivial though these errors may be. He is talking about his "staff plan": that is, the correct selection and placement of his subordinates. It is a tough transition from the staff of twenty-eight that he had maintained under Lord Darlington, the previous owner, to a skeleton staff of four under his new employer, a Mr. Farraday. This new owner intends to stay in the house only part of the time, and suggests that, while he is away, Stevens should take the car and go on a trip. As a good butler, Stevens finds a reason for the trip (God forbid he should simply take a vacation): he will visit Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper. Her last letter indicated that she may be unhappy in her marriage, and he believes he may be able to persuade her to come back to her old job. We suspect right away, of course, that there is more to his intentions than improving his "staff plan"; yet by choosing the quest as a plot device, Ishiguro follows the tradition to a tee.

There is an almost-perfect harmony of style and substance in the book's relationship between the writer and his narrator: Stevens prepares for the trip with the meticulousness that is matched only by the way Ishiguro describes it. Like a seasoned general, Stevens plans for every emergency, a facility he developed by planning many an occasion at his master's house. He describes the complicated arrangements that involve valets, maids, and other domestics with the tireless attention to detail that, in the writer's capable hands, is never boring. We realize that Stevens is a perfectionist who demands perfection from others: when he checks into a guest house, he inspects the room with a thoroughness reminiscent of those Leona Helmsley advertisements, minus the latter's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

snideness—no detail is too trivial to fuss over in doing the job right.

We learn to take this professionalism for granted, and, had Ishiguro left it at that, we would have a readable Arthur Hailey novel—*Estate*, for example. But in the course of his snail's-pace, scrupulously charted progress to Little Compton, Cornwall, on Britain's West Coast, Stevens takes many opportunities to ponder the nature of his *métier*. It is a measure of the author's talent that none of these digressions feels distracting or extraneous; they are introduced in a manner so polite and delicate as to make us feel like guests at the estate of this novel, enjoying the service of its perfect host. So Stevens poses a question: What makes a "great" butler?

After quoting a number of amusing anecdotes, he arrives at the word *dignity*. It transcends mere competence; it "has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits." For example, Stevens's father—who was not merely a butler but a "great" one—once had to serve a guest, an obnoxious general whose military incompetence had caused the death of his son, i.e., Stevens's brother. Not for one moment did his father betray his feelings—and afterward he donated the general's large tip to charity.

The anecdote itself is not very remarkable—the Brits have a long tradition of stiff-upper-lip tales apt to tax a foreigner's patience—but its placement is uncanny. Up until now we had been solidly in Stevens's corner; now there appears to be something disturbing about the *pride* with which he extols his father's obedience.

It is becoming clear that Stevens is not merely contemplating the meaning of butlering, using his father as an example. He is grappling with ways to justify his life, for once you take his professionalism, his *dignity*, out of the picture, not much is left. In describing his service, he implicitly contradicts the truism that no man is a hero to his valet; on the contrary, he says "a 'great' butler can only be, surely, one who can point to his years of service and say that he has applied his talents to serving a great gentleman—and through the latter, to serving humanity." And it is only through his master that Stevens manages to establish his own worth.

Lord Darlington was a powerful statesman who wielded his influence in international affairs. Stevens recalls a behind-the-closed-doors conference taking place at Darlington Hall, one that would re-draw the map of Europe between the wars. Stevens had gone on serving the guests and—he maintains in a voice that throbs with pride—the cause of "justice" (as his master put it). By doing so, he had to ignore his own father, who was in the throes of death. But jumping to conclusions will not take you far. "I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now," Stevens says—and he is likely to be right. What started out as a mild comedy of manners turns into a tragedy, one that never loses its subtlety or power of understatement.

The initial irony gains momentum as it turns out that Lord Darlington, with his old-fashioned ideals of chivalry, was successfully bamboozled by the Nazis into championing their interests. Stevens's apologia for his master loses its validity fast, especially when Lord Darlington, influenced by Nazi sympathizers, orders the dismissal of two Jewish maids on his staff. Except, of course, it is Stevens who has to do the firing, and thus cross the fine line between the loyalty that is the essence of his professionalism and the blind obedience of "just following orders."

Finally, as another hush-hush summit takes place, attended by Lord Halifax, Ribbentrop, and other European dignitaries, Miss Kenton the housekeeper informs Stevens that she is about to accept a proposal of marriage. Earlier, she made amorous advances toward Stevens that he was afraid to recognize, and now, again, he does not—or will not—react; such considerations get in the way of his own modest contribution to realpolitik in the making.

Little by little, with unflagging mastery, Ishiguro unravels the disintegration of the good old world where Stevens and his ideals

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

held value. Miss Kenton gives up on him, gets married, and leaves; following Lord Darlington's death, the house is sold to Mr. Farraday, an American with whose bantering Stevens feels ill at ease; glitches appear in his "staff plans"; and now, in the course of the trip, Stevens's car runs out of gas, and he is forced to seek shelter in a simple village. He recalls a recent incident in which he concealed his years of service under Darlington in response to a visitor's question (thus invoking his American master's anger: the latter wanted to show Stevens off as a "genuine" English butler!). Now, as the villagers interpret his car, his clothes, and his refined manner as proof of his aristocratic origins, he implicitly encourages them, loath to reveal his true status.

Finally, after twenty years apart, Stevens and Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn) meet again. No melodramatics are allowed in the eight pages between "Ah, Mr. Stevens. How nice to see you again," and "It was a great pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Benn"; yet the drama of two middle-aged people whose lives did not quite work out the way they might have is conveyed with exquisite poise. When Miss Kenton confesses that sometimes she gets "to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens," he is dumbstruck for a moment, but regains his composure quickly and agrees with her that "it is too late to turn back the clock . . . . You really mustn't let any more foolish ideas come between yourself and the happiness you deserve." In an odd way, I was reminded of the ending of Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, where two old people do get to consummate their passion. The two endings are diametrically opposite, and both work admirably.

If in its description the novel seems a bit calculated—well, it is. A modern reader may feel manipulated by the author's too-convenient timing of the crucial scenes and might argue that it is a TV writer's job to time to the minute the plots of "International Conference Upstairs" and "A Death in the Family Downstairs"; a modern novelist

Glenn Goldberg

Painted Panels

December 2, 1989 to January 4, 1990

Knoedler & Company

19 East 70 Street, New York Telephone (212) 794-0550

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

should have more freedom. But such deliberate plotting is strictly in keeping with the nineteenth-century genre that Ishiguro studiously follows. On the other hand, Ishiguro is, perhaps, too eager to cover all bases, as when he exposes Stevens to the populist views of farmers when the butler spends a night in the village. It seems redundant: surely by then the reader has already realized that Stevens's lack of awareness of the world outside his master's estate approaches that of Chauncey Gardiner's, the hero of Jerzy Kosinsky's *Being There*.

But these grievances rear their ugly heads only in post-analysis; such is the author's control over his narrative, so perfect is his command of language, that one simply relishes the story, page after page, suspending the dour reviewer's thoughts. Without Ishiguro's awesome technique this would be just another "little-guy" story, an able Chekhov imitation (Ishiguro has a knack for balancing laughter and tears, too) with no voice of its own; happily, this is not the case.

Ishiguro came to England at the age of six and is the author of two earlier novels; the hero of one of them, *An Artist of the Floating World*, is also an old man taking stock of his life. I do not wish to dwell unduly on Ishiguro's background, but when Stevens admires the English landscape for "the very *lack* of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart," I cannot help thinking how neatly his description fits some of the Japanese criteria for beauty. Stevens's attention to detail is comparable to that of an origami maker (one might even compare the institution of English high tea with the Japanese tea ceremony). Stevens's insistence on ritual; his stoicism in performing his duties, especially in the face of adversity; his loyalty to his master that conflicts with his humanity—all of these are prominent aspects of the Japanese collective psyche, and Ishiguro imbues his description of Stevens's world with a fine Japanese sensibility. Yet—the proof of his mastery—had he chosen to publish the book under an assumed Anglo name, one would never suspect.

At the end of the novel Stevens sits on the pier at the resort town of Weymouth, waiting for the pier lights to come on. Having just bared his soul to a stranger (who turns out to be a colleague, albeit of lower stature), he muses that

> [p]erhaps, then, there is something to his advice that I should cease looking back so much, that I should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day. After all, what can we ever gain in forever looking back and blaming ourselves if our lives have not turned out quite as we might have wished? The hard reality is, surely, that for the likes of you and I, there is little choice other than to leave our fate, ultimately, in the hands of those great gentlemen at the hub of this world who employ our services.

At first glance, the "we" comes unexpectedly—you rather thought you were a guest; but the two hundred and fifty pages of narrative have done such a superb job of pulling you into the protagonist's world, of sharing his victories and defeats, however minute they might seem, that for a moment you, too, feel sorry you have to leave. Yet has Stevens caught the virus of American positive thinking from his employer? "Bantering is hardly an unreasonable duty for an employer to expect a professional to perform," he concludes, and resolves to develop this skill and thus to become a perfect butler to his American master. You cannot help wishing him the best of luck.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

154 WOOSTER STREET USA 10012 212.353.1702

9 DECEMBER–13 JANUARY

Bill Freeland

New Sculpture

Dolan/Maxwell *New York*

1701 WALNUT STREET USA 19013 215.665.1701

Dolan/Maxwell *Philadelphia*

30 DECEMBER–27 JANUARY

Frank Stella

The Waves

The only east coast exhibition of the entire, recently completed, set of 13 mixed media prints based on "Moby Dick".

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

St. Francis, Keen's cement and plaster
40″ × 35″ × 18″

Turku Trajan

Sculpture

December 1989

Zabriskie Gallery

724 Fifth Avenue, New York 10019
Fax (212) 974-8492

An Exhibition of Early 20th Century American Paintings
Thru December 20, 1989

Jan Matulka. Outskirts of Paris. Oil on canvas. 23 x 29 inches.

ROBERT SCHOELKOPF GALLERY
50 W 57 ST NEW YORK 10019 212-765-3540

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

John Constable, R. A.

Paintings, Watercolors and Drawings

Essay by Sir Lawrence Gowing

Eugène Delacroix

Paintings and Drawings

Essays by F. Constable, H. I. Kay, M. Florisoone, J. Meier-Graefe

Peter Paul Rubens

Three Oil Sketches

Horacio Torres

Selected Paintings from the 1970s

November 15 to December 30

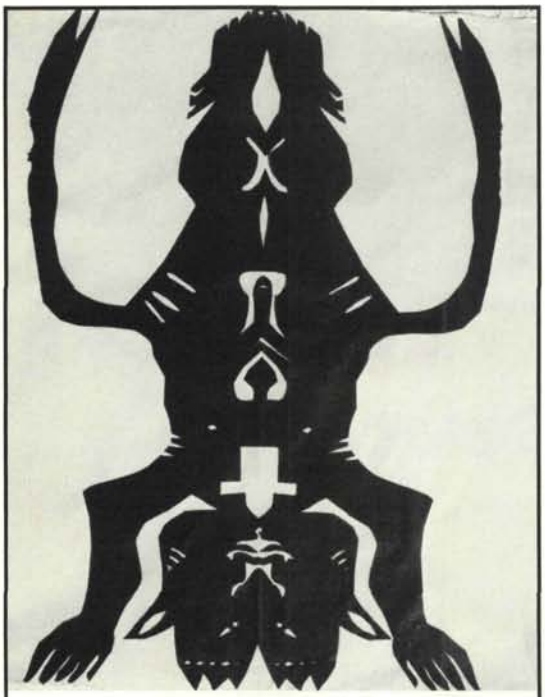
Catalogues available

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

20 East 79 Street New York, NY 10021

Tel (212) 879-6606 Fax 212 744 0655

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



L. Giordano, cut-out / rice paper

"CALIFORNIA, BITS & PIECES"

works by

PATRICK BISCONTI
DIANA TARTAR
L. GIORDANO
JOAN GOLLUB

DEC. 2 - JAN. 31

Human Art Gallery Studio
1319 W. Washington Blvd.
Venice, CA 90291

213 • 399 • 8188

David
ARONSON

Paul
CADMUS

Enrico
DONATI

Edward
HOPPER

Matsumi
KANEMITSU

Peter
MILTON

Henry
MOORE

Pablo
PICASSO

Auguste
RODIN

William
ZORACH

Francisco
ZUNIGA

LOUIS NEWMAN GALLERIES

322 North Beverly Drive
Beverly Hills, CA 90210 • (213) 278-6311

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEW FROM CALIFORNIA

The State of the Language

1990 Edition

Edited by CHRISTOPHER RICKS and LEONARD MICHAELS

"Sprawling, uncoordinated, uneven, noisy, and appealing," wrote one reviewer of the first edition of this book, published on 1 January 1980.

Exactly a decade later, here is the book anew, with the same editors but with fifty fresh contributors writing essays and poems that engage our language today.

The nervous negotiations of gender and feminism. The darkness of AIDS. The bright flicker of the computer. The "bad language" that has lately done so well in our society. How all this has been politicized—or is it rather that its inevitably political nature has only now been recognized? $25.00

A Matter of Passion

Letters of Bernard Berenson and Clotilde Marghieri

Edited by DARIO BIOCCA

"A fascinating self-revealing and self-concealing account of aspects of both correspondents, so alike in their cultured, narcissistic sensitivity, and so dramatically and amusingly different in other ways, she so young and *bien rangeé* and ambitious for experience, he so experienced, analytical and insatiable for youth and beauty. The letters show a side of Berenson generally known but never so clearly documented."

—Louise George Clubb, University of California, Berkeley $25.00

Parables of Sun Light

Observations on Psychology, the Arts, and the Rest

RUDOLF ARNHEIM

For many years Arnheim, known as the leading psychologist of art, has been keeping notebooks in which to jot down observations, ideas, questions, and even (after a stay in Japan for a year) poems in the *haiku* pattern. Some of these notes found their way into his books. Now he has selected, from the remaining riches of his notebooks, the items in this volume. He is always concrete, in the manner that has become his trademark, often witty, and sometimes a bit wicked. $27.50

At bookstores or order toll-free 1-800-822-6657. Visa & MasterCard only.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

BERKELEY 94720

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RICHARD BENSON: PHOTOGRAPHS IN PAINT

Sluice Gate Gear, 1988, photograph in paint, 12½ × 15½ inches

DECEMBER 5 - JANUARY 6, 1990

WASHBURN GALLERY 41 EAST 57 NEW YORK 10022 (212) 753-0546

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 503
New York NY 10019

Second Class Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

DUNVFMLBRRZ25ZA 12/31/89
UNIV OF MASSACHUSETTS-BOSTON
HEALEY LIBRARY-PERIODICALS
HARBOR CAMPUS
BOSTON, MA 02125

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED